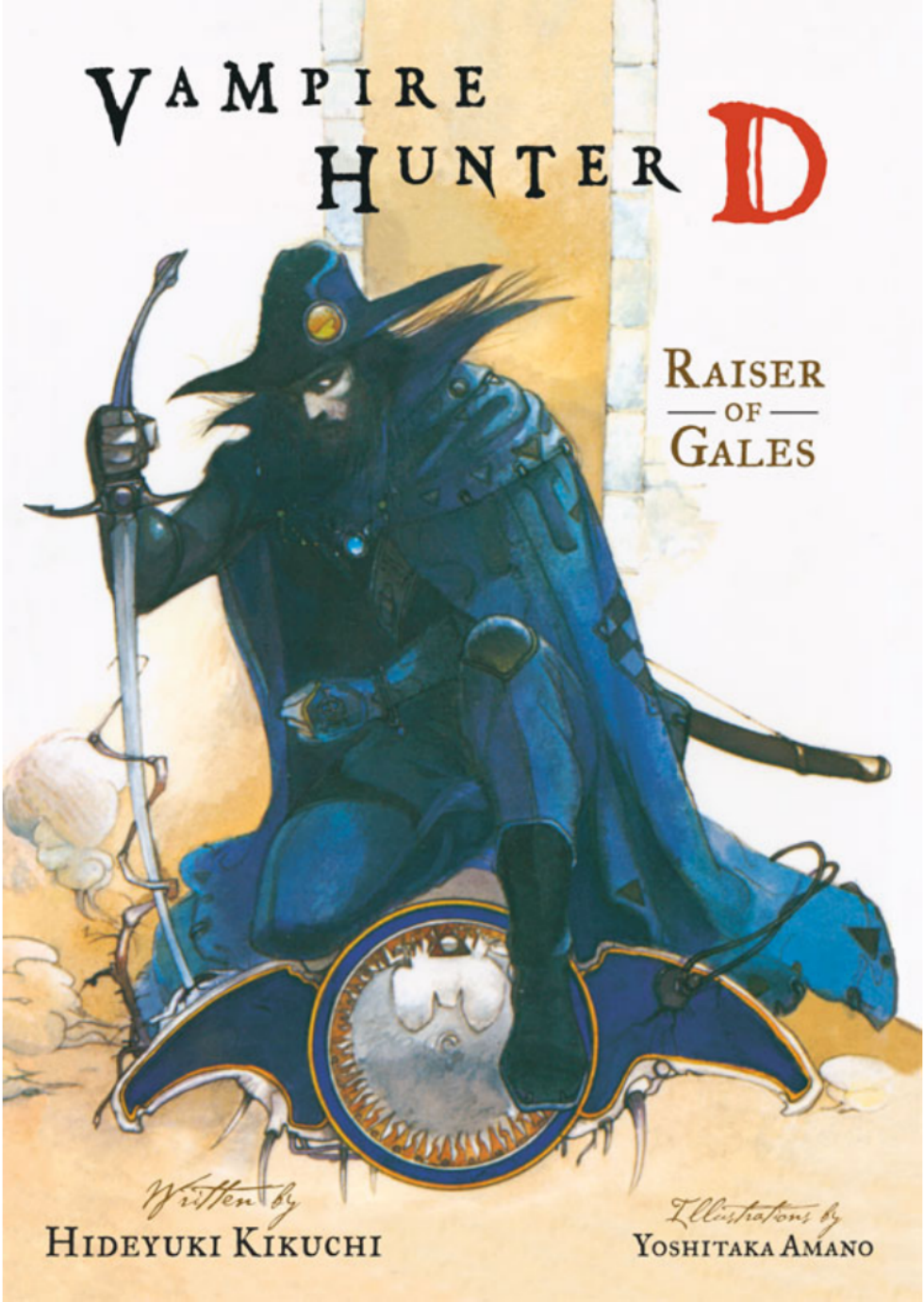
VAMPIRE HUNTER D

RAISER OF GALES



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Vampire Hunter D: Raiser of Gales

Vampire Hunter D [2]

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VAMPIRE HUNTER D

VOLUME 2

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VAMPIRE HUNTER D 2: RAISER OF GALES

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A VILLAGE IN WINTER

CHAPTER 1

Wintry sunlight fell from high in the hollow sky to the valley below. Bright enough to trick a smile out of you and cold enough to empty your lungs in a cloudy white chain of coughs, the rays bound for the narrow and more or less straight trail were also quite refreshing. Perhaps that was because spring wasn't so far off.

Not far from there, the road through the valley came to a modest plain surrounded by black woods and ushered travelers into a tiny Frontier hamlet.

Including the ranches and solar farms scattered about the area, there were still probably less than two hundred homes. The roofs of wooden and tensile-plastic houses were crusted white with remnants of snow, as were alleys that never saw the light of day. And the people in the hamlet, so bundled in heavy furs they might easily be mistaken for beasts, wore stern expressions. Even for the littlest of children, the single-minded determination to live made a hard mask of their features.

A narrow stream ran through the center of town from east to west. The surface of its clear waters reflected a sturdy bridge, and at this moment a silent procession of people crossed the bridge with a grave gait.

Ten men and two women were in the group. Sobs spilled from one woman's lips as she hid her face with the well-worn sleeve of an insulated overcoat. Graying hair reached her shoulders. The other woman—also in her forties, by the look of her—stood by her side, with an arm around her back for support. No doubt they were neighbors. Although this pair set the tone for the whole party, their grief hadn't yet elicited a sympathetic response from the men.

The old man at the fore wore a robe heavily adorned with magical formulae and all manner of strange symbols, and his face was wrought with terror. The other men were plastered with almost identical expressions, though six of them were also plainly in physical pain caused by the abominable burden digging down into their shoulders.

An oak coffin.

However, more disquieting by far was the heavy chain wrapped around the coffin. It almost seemed like a concerted

effort had been made to keep whatever rested within the coffin from getting back out, and the way the chain rattled dully in the wintry light echoed the desperate fear of those who bore the oak box.

The party came to a halt at the center of the bridge. That was where the structure jutted out an extra yard on either side, forming a small gathering place over the river.

The old man who led them pointed to one side.

With much shuffling of their feet, the men bearing the coffin hustled over to the railing.

Giving a shudder, the sturdy man by the elder's side reached for the weapons girding his waist—steel stakes a good foot and a half long. The man had at least half a dozen of them in a pouch on his belt. His other hand pulled out the hammer he wore on the opposite side of his belt. The old-fashioned gunpowder revolver he had holstered there didn't even merit a glance.

Loosing an anguished scream, one of the women scrambled toward the coffin, but her neighbor and the rest of the men managed to restrain her.

"You simmer down," the old man shouted at her reproachfully.

The woman hid her face in her hands. If not for those supporting her, she'd undoubtedly have collapsed on the spot.

Casting an emotionless glance at the slender coffin, the elder raised his right hand to his shoulder and began to intone the words befitting such a ceremony.

"I am here today, my heart like unto a mournful abyss beyond description. Gina Bolan, beloved daughter of Seka Bolan and resident #8009 of the village of Tepes, Western Frontier Sector Seven, fell victim to the despised Nobility and passed away last night . . ."

At this, the faces of the pallbearers grew visibly paler, but the elder may not have noticed.

Six pairs of eyes restlessly shifted about, their collective gaze turning imploringly to the calm surface of the river.

There was nothing to see there. Nothing whatsoever out of the ordinary.

Within the coffin, something stirred. Not someone. Some*thing*.

The men's faces inched closer to the coffin, as if caught in its gravity.

Clank clank, went the chains.

The men's faces grew white as a sheet.

The mayor shouted the name of the man with the stakes.

"Down! Put it down now!" the armed man said in a terror-cramped tone as he stepped closer. The other men didn't comply

with his command. Brains and nerves and even muscles stiffened as fear stampeded through their bodies. This was by no means the first such ceremony they'd been involved in. However, the phenomenon now taking place in that box on their shoulders was patently impossible. For pity's sake, it was *daytime!*

Seeing the condition of the others, the man with the hammer and stake clanged his weapons together, shouting tersely, "Set 'er down on the railing!" The result was evident enough.

Whatever spell had held the men waned, and the coffin, which was a heartbeat shy of being thrown over the side, came to rest on the thick handrail. Three of the men still supported the other side of it.

It was a weird frenzy of activity on the bridge that fine, prevernal day.

The well-armed man dashed over and set the sharpened steel tip of a stake against the lid of the coffin.

His granite-tough face was deeply streaked by fear and impatience. The timing of this flew in the face of his vast personal experience and undermined the confidence he drew from long years on the job.

Sounds continued to issue from the coffin. From the way it shook and the sounds it made, it seemed that whatever it contained had awakened and was fumbling around without any idea of its present predicament.

The man raised his hammer high.

Suddenly, the sounds coming from the coffin changed. Powerful blows struck the lid from the inside, shaking not only the coffin with a powerful pummeling but also the men carrying it.

The elder cried something.

With a low growl, the hammer tore through the air. Shouting and the sounds of destruction melded into one.

The stake pierced the coffin at almost exactly the same second a pale hand smashed through the heavy planks and clawed at the air. The hand of a mere child!

Wildly twitching, the hand clutched at the air again and again. In a split second, the hand flew to the throat of the man who stood there, hammer still in hand and utterly dumbfounded.

". . . Coffin . . . drop . . . the damn coffin!"

Blood gushed from the man's throat along with those words.

This ghastly tableau did more than his orders to rouse the men's consciousness. Shoulder muscles bulging, they tilted the coffin high on the railing. It fell with the other man still pinned to the lid, sending up a splash that flowered in countless droplets

across the surface of the river.

Surely the coffin must have been weighted, for it rapidly sank and merged with the ash-gray bottom. Amid the remaining ripples, crimson liquid bubbled up from one of those who sank with it, but in the world above the tranquil light of winter blanketed all creation. Only a woman's sobs remained to testify to the gruesome tragedy that had just played out.

Blades of grass that had long borne the weight of the snow took advantage of the reverberations from the heavy footfalls to throw off their burden. After all, their day would be here soon enough.

The footsteps came from a number of people, each and every one of them looking as tough as a boulder and as beefy as a Martian steer. Even through their heavy fur coats the bulging of their well-developed muscles was plain. All were in their twenties. Not even their apparent leader, a man a bit taller than the rest, had hit thirty yet. They belonged to the village's Youth Brigade.

The reason they were breathing so heavily was because they'd already been climbing this slope for nearly nine hours. But it was clear from their expressions and the look in their eyes that they weren't here for a picnic. Faces hardened by brooding, frustration, and rage, they seemed on the verge of tears. From the look of it, they were trying in vain to hold back the pitch-black terror welling inside them. The pair bringing up the rear was especially short of breath, partly because each had a wooden crate full of weapons strapped to his back, but mainly because of the gently rolling hill they were trying to climb.

It was a weird piece of geography.

A mile and a quarter in diameter at the base and roughly sixty feet high, it looked like an ordinary hill from both the ground and the air. Those who set foot on its slopes, however, found that it took several hours to reach the summit no matter how great they were at hiking.

Black ruins rose from the summit of the hill.

That was where the men were headed. However, that simple goal, glowering down at the surrounding landscape from a scant altitude of sixty feet, was not unlike the mirages that were said to occur in the Frontier's desert regions—it taunted these men as they tried to reach it, and would do the same to anyone else who accepted the challenge.

The distance never decreased.

Their feet clearly tread the slope, and their bodies told them they were indeed steadily gaining elevation. And yet, the further

reaches of the incline and the ruins they sought never got any closer.

Taking into account the reports of all who had experienced this phenomenon, it was estimated that a man in prime condition took thirty minutes to climb three feet. Ten hours to the top—even on level ground, that much walking would leave a man exhausted. Climbing the hill, it only got worse, as the slope grew steeper and the trek became ever more fatiguing. It really came as little surprise that no one had even tried to climb it in the last three years.

The man at the forefront of the group—Haig, their leader—took no notice of his companions as he scanned the western horizon. The sun would be going down in two hours, falling behind the forest and the silvery chain of peaks far beyond them. That made it roughly three o'clock Afternoon, Frontier Standard Time.

If they didn't reach the top, accomplish their aim, and take their leave in the one hundred and twenty remaining minutes, Haig knew as well as anyone what fate awaited them when darkness fell.

To make matters worse, once they eventually made it to the summit, the fact of the matter was they didn't have the faintest idea where in the ruins the thing they sought would be slumbering. Although a roughly sketched map was stuffed in the leader's breast pocket, it had been drawn decades earlier by someone who had since passed away, so they weren't entirely sure whether they could rely on it or not.

And then there was their exhausted state to consider. Though this group had been selected from the proudest and strongest of the Youth Brigade, the taxing climb was actually far more fatiguing mentally than it was physically. While no amount of struggling would bring them any closer to their goal, sheer impatience could physically destroy them. This psychological test was said to be a particularly effective defense against intruders from the world below. Once the members of the Youth Brigade set foot in the ruins, there was some question as to whether or not they would have sufficient strength remaining to search out *its* resting place.

The only thing they had working in their favor was the fact that on the way down, at least, the hill lost its mystic hold over climbers. If they ran all the way, they could be down to the foot of the hill in less than two minutes.

Suddenly, Haig's sweat-stained countenance was suffused with joy.

He knew the distance between the summit ahead and him was "real" now. Less than thirty feet remained. Ignoring the panting of his air-starved lungs, he shouted, "We're there!" From behind him, satisfied grunts rose in response.

A few minutes later, the whole group was resting in the courtyard of the ruins. The shadow of fatigue fell heavily on each and every face, rendering them almost laughable.

"Just about time to get down to it. Break out the weapons," ordered Haig. He alone remained standing, surveying their surroundings.

The group huddled around the two wooden crates.

Off came the lids. Inside were five hammers, ten wooden stakes honed to trenchant points, and twenty Molotov cocktails that had been fashioned from wine bottles filled with tractor fuel and corked with rags. In addition, they had five bundles of powerful mining explosives with individual timers. Each of the men also had a bowie knife, sword, or machete stuck through the belt around his waist.

Everyone took a weapon.

"You all know the plan, right?" Haig said, just to be sure. "I don't know if we can put a whole lot of stock in this copy of the map or not, but right about now we ain't got any other options. If you think you're in trouble, give a whistle. You find out where *it* is, give two."

Bloodshot eyes bobbed up and down as the men nodded and got to their feet. Their grand scheme was going into action.

A wholly unexpected voice stopped them in their tracks.

"Just a second. Where the blazes are you boys off to all charged up like that?"

Every one of them moved like they'd been jerked back on a leash, turning toward the voice even as they went for their weapons.

From a shadowy entrance in the sole remaining wall of the stony ruins—a cavernous opening that faced the courtyard—a lone girl stepped casually into the afternoon light. Raven hair hung down to the shoulders of her winter coat, and what showed of her thighs looked cold but inviting.

"Well if it ain't Lina! What brings you up—," one of the men started to ask, swallowing the rest of the question. The eyes of all took on a tinge of terror, as well as the scornful hue of someone whose suspicions have proved correct. They'd known the answer to that question for quite some time.

"What the hell do you boys think you're doing? You'd better not go and do anything stupid," the girl said, as she looked Haig

square in the eye. Although her visage was still so innocent it couldn't look stern if she tried, her face shone with the sagacity and the allure of a mature woman. She was at that awkward stage, a neat little bud waiting for spring, a heartbeat away from bursting open into a glorious blossom.

"Suppose you tell me what the hell brings you up here," said Haig, his words dripping out like molasses. His gaze had fallen to Lina's bare feet. "It ain't like you don't know the shit that's going on in town. The whole place's been turned inside out and we still didn't find *it*. Meaning this is the only place left for it to hide, wouldn't you say?"

"Well, that doesn't mean you have to haul a load of bombs up here, does it? Stakes and Molotov cocktails should do the job."

"That's nothing that concerns you," Haig said scornfully. "Now answer the damn question. Why the hell are you up here? We sure as shit didn't see you on our way up here. Just how long you been up here, anyway?"

"I just got here. And for your information, I came up the other side. So of course you didn't see me."

As the men looked at each other they had a strange glint in their eyes.

"Well in that case, I guess the hill *can't fool you* none—looks like we had it figured right all along. Unless I miss my guess, you're the one responsible for what's happening in town."

"Spare me your conjecture. You know I've been at home every time anything happened."

"You don't say. Hell, the whole bunch of you have been screwy since *that* happened. We got no way of knowing what kind of powers you been using behind our backs."

Haig suddenly had nothing more to say. He gave his cohorts a toss of his chin. All of them smiled lasciviously as they started to close in on Lina.

"We're gonna have to check you out now. Gonna peel you down buck-ass naked."

"You stop this foolishness right now. Do you have any idea how much trouble you'll get in if you even try it?"

"Ha! That supposed to be a threat?" one of them jeered. "Everybody in town knows full well what's going on between you and the mayor, missy. If we can prove you're a plain ol' woman now, the old geezer'll be happier than a pig in shit."

"And that ain't the half of it," another added. "After all of us have had a turn with you, you'll be feeling so damn good you'll lose your tongue for ratting us out."

Haig licked his lips. These young men were known to be rough

customers—that was precisely the reason they were perfect for protecting the village from brutal groups of roving bandits or vicious beasts. But now, their exhaustion and the fear of the work to come churned together into a slimy mess that suffocated what little sense they'd been born with.

Lina made no attempt to escape. Haig grabbed her by the arms and pulled her close. His greasy lips savagely latched onto her fine mouth. Pulling her coat up with one hand, he groped at her thighs, while his tongue tried to force its way between her perfect teeth.

Suddenly, there was a dull smack and his massive frame doubled over at the waist. With lightning speed, Lina had slammed her knee into Haig's privates, leaving him speechless and on his knees. She didn't even spare him a backward glance as she disappeared into an entrance of the ruins.

"You little bitch!" shouted one of the three men who went after her.

Because it was still daytime, only anger and lust managed to beat back the thugs' fear of entering the ruins.

Weird machinery and furniture seemed to float in the chill darkness, but they ignored these objects as they ran. Twisting and turning down one sculpture- and painting-adorned corridor after another, they eventually caught up to Lina in a vast room, a hall of some sort.

Stripping off her coat when they caught her by the shoulder, she stumbled and fell face first, but the three of them tackled her and rolled her onto her back.

Lina cried, "Quit it!"

"Stop your squirming. We're gonna do you real good. All three of us at once!"

Just as the men were pinning her pallid and desperately thrashing hands and closing on her sweet lips . . .

They were struck by the creepiest sensation. Even Lina forgot her struggles and donned a hue of terror. From that strange knot of humanity, four pairs of eyes focused on the same spot in the darkness simultaneously.

Out of the unplumbed depths of the blackness, a single shadowy figure emerged. A figure that seemed to them darker by far than the blackness shrouding this whole universe.

"One civilization met its end here," said a soft voice flecked with rust, the words drifting through the darkness. "While it's impossible to halt the progress of time, you would do well to show some respect for what's been lost."

Lina scrambled up and took cover behind the figure, but the

men didn't so much as twitch. They couldn't even speak. Animal instincts honed by more than two decades of doing battle with the forces of nature told them just what this person was. It was something far surpassing what they'd expected to find here.

Footsteps rang out at the entrance to the hall, but soon halted. Haig and the rest of the men had burst into the room with enraged expressions, but then froze in their tracks.

"Wha— what the hell are you?"

Not surprisingly, it was the leader of the suicide squad who finally managed to speak, but just barely. His tremulous voice and the chattering of his teeth told volumes about how he, too, had been laid low by this ghastly aura beyond human ken. At that moment, the only thoughts running through the minds of Haig's men concerned getting down off the hill as fast as humanly possible.

"Leave. This is no place for you."

At the stranger's bidding, the men got to their feet and started to back away. The reason they remained facing forward was not so much due to the old adage about never letting your foe see your back as it was due to their terror at not knowing what might happen to them if they turned around. *Some things are worse than dying*, the men all muttered in their heart of hearts.

Once they'd fallen back to the hall's entrance, the men regained some of their spirit. The roof of the windowless corridor was laced with cracks that let the sunlight pour in.

Haig pulled out a Molotov cocktail and another man produced some matches. Striking the match on his pants, he put the flame to the rags. Haig heaved the firebomb with such an exaggerated throw he seemed to be trying to blast his own fears away. No consideration at all was given to Lina's safety.

The blazing bottle limned a smooth arc across the room and landed at the pair's feet. But no two-thousand-degree lake of flames spread from it. The bottle simply stood upright on the intricately mosaicked floor. There was a tinkling *clink* as the neck of the bottle and the flaming rag it contained dropped to the floor.

The men probably hadn't even seen the silvery flash that had split the air.

Panic ensued.

Loosing an audacious chorus of screams, the men scrambled over each other in an effort to flee down the hallway. And they didn't look back. The fear of the supernatural world bubbled from a gaping wound where their reason had just been severed, and that fear threatened now to take shape. The men drove their legs with all their desperate might to avoid having to see what shape it

took.

Once she was sure their footsteps had died away, Lina finally stepped away from the stranger's back. Sticking out her cute little tongue, she turned to the exit and made the rudest gesture she knew. She must've been amazingly sedate by nature, because she no longer seemed in the least bit troubled as her eyes gazed first at the truncated bottle and the guttering flame, then up at the muscular stranger with admiration.

"You're really incredible, you . . ." she began to say, but her voice gave out on her.

Now her eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, and they'd taken in the face of her savior. An exquisite face, like a silent winter night preserved for all time.

"What is it?"

Shaken back to her senses by the sound of his voice, Lina said the first thing that popped into her mind. She was a rather straightforward girl.

"You sure are handsome. Took my breath away, you did."

"You'd best go home. This is no place for you," the owner of that gorgeous countenance said once more, his words not so much cold as emotionless.

Lina had already reclaimed enough of her senses to shamelessly eye the man from head to toe.

He couldn't have been a day over twenty. His wide-brimmed traveler's hat and the elegant longsword he wore across the back of his black longcoat made it clear he was no tourist. A blue pendant dangled on his chest. The deep, soul-swallowing shade of blue seemed to fit the youth perfectly.

Like hell I'm leaving. I'll go wherever I damn well please, Lina wanted to say, but the words she hastily uttered were the exact opposite of what she actually felt.

"If you insist, the very least you could do is walk me out."

At this unexpected request, the youth headed toward the exit without making a sound.

"Hey, wait just a second, you. Aren't we the hasty one!" Flustered, Lina hurried after him. She thought about latching onto the hem of his coat or maybe his arm, but didn't actually go through with it. This young man had an intensity about him that completely locked him off from the rest of the world.

Mutely trailing after him, the girl stepped out into the courtyard.

To Lina's utter amazement, the youth quickly turned around and headed back toward the entrance. She jumped up again.

"For goodness sake, would you just wait a minute? You didn't

even give me a chance to say thank you, you big dolt!"

"Go home before the sun sets. The way down is normal enough."

The shadowy figure didn't turn to face her as he spoke, but his words made Lina's eyes go wide.

"And just how would you know that? Come to think of it, when did you get here, anyway? It couldn't be you can walk up here *like normal*, could it?!"

Just shy of the entrance, the young man halted. Without facing her, he said, "So, you can climb the hill normally, too, I take it?"

"That's right. My circumstances are kind of special," Lina said, sounding strangely resolved for once. "Wanna hear about it? Of course you do. After all, you came all the way up here to see these ruins—the remnants of a Noble's castle."

The youth started to walk away again.

"Oh, curse you," Lina cried, stomping her feet in anger. "At least give me your name. If you don't, I'm not heading home—come sunset or not. If I get attacked and maimed by monsters, it'll be on your conscience for the rest of your days. I'm Lina Sween, by the way."

Apparently her badgering paid off, for a low voice drifted from the silhouette as it melded with the darkness filling the doorway. He said but a single word.

"D."

Later that night, a Vampire Hunter paid a call on the home of the village's mayor.

"Well I'll be . . ."

Having pulled a dressing gown over his pajamas and come downstairs, the sleepy-eyed mayor forgot what he was about to say when he saw the beauty of the Hunter standing at the other end of the living room with his back to the wall.

"I see now why our maid's walking around like something sucked the soul out of her. Well, I can't very well put you up here in my house. I've got a daughter for one thing, and the women's groups are always coming and going through here."

"I've already put my horse and my gear in the barn," D said softly. "I'd like to hear your proposition."

"Before we start, why don't you set yourself down. You must be coming off a long ride, I'd wager."

D didn't move. Nonchalantly drawing back the hand he'd used to indicate a seat, the mayor gave a nod. The valet, who'd just thrown a load of kindling and condensed fuel into the fireplace and was awaiting further instruction, was ordered out.

"Never show the enemy your back, eh? Indeed, I suppose you've got no proof I'm on your side."

"I was under the impression you hired Geslin before me," D suggested. It almost appeared he hadn't been listening to a word the mayor had to say.

By the look of him, the mayor was a pushy man, but he didn't let the slightest hint of displeasure show on his face. In part, this was because he'd heard rumors about the skill of the super Grade A Hunter he was dealing with. But more than that, it was because just having the Hunter standing beside him made the mayor feel in his flesh and bones that the Hunter was a being from a whole other world. Though he had exquisite features far more beautiful than any human, the ghastly aura emanating from the Hunter

shook to the fore something mankind usually kept buried in the deepest depths of its psyche—the fear of the unknown darkness.

"Geslin's dead," the mayor spat. "He was a top-notch Grade A Hunter, but he couldn't find us our *vampire*, and he went and got himself killed by an eight-year-old girl to boot. Got his throat ripped clean open, so we don't have to worry about him *coming back*, but we paid him a hundred thousand dalas in advance—what a fiasco!"

"I understand the circumstances were somewhat unusual."

The mayor pursed his lips in surprise. "You know about that, do you? Well, that's a dhampir for you! Seems there might be something after all to them rumors that you can hear the winds blowing out of Hell."

D said nothing.

The mayor gave a brief account of the disaster that had occurred on the bridge roughly two weeks earlier, saying in conclusion, "And all of this happened in broad daylight. By the look of you, I'd wager you've seen more than I have in my seventy years on this earth. But I don't suppose that'd happen to include victims of vampires who can walk in the light of day, now would it?"

D remained silent. That in and of itself was his answer.

It just wasn't possible. The Nobility and those whose lives they'd claimed were permitted their travesty of life by night alone. The world of daylight had been ceded to humanity.

"I think you have a pretty good notion why I've called you here. Think about it. If those damnable Nobles and their retinue were free to move not just by night but by light of day as well, do you have any idea what would become of the world?"

The darkness and chill of the room seemed to increase exponentially. To save wear on their generators, it was commonplace to use lamps fueled with animal fat for lighting at night on the Frontier. The old man's eyes seemed to smolder as he stared at the hands he held out to warm. D didn't move a muscle, as if he'd become a statue.

Really set my hooks into him that time, the mayor snickered in his heart of hearts. His words had been chosen for maximum effect on the psyche of his guest, and surely they would've dealt a severe blow to the beautiful half-breed Hunter. *Oh, yes—come tomorrow, things are bound to be a bit more manageable around here.*

However, all did not go quite as expected.

"Could you elaborate on what's happened in this case so far?"

D's voice carried no fear or uneasiness, and, for a moment, the mayor was left dumbstruck. So, the horrifying thought of

bloodthirsty vampires running amuck in the world by day had no impact on this dhampir? Wrestling down his surprise a split second before it could rise to his face, the mayor began to speak in a tone more subdued than was necessary.

It all started with the ruins and four children.

Even now, no one knew for sure just how long the ruins had stood on that hill. When the village founders had first set foot in this territory nearly two centuries earlier, the ruins were already choked with vines. Several times the hill had been scaled by suicide squads who produced roughly sketched maps and studied its ancient history, but while they were doing so a number of strange phenomena had occurred. Fifty years ago a group of investigators had come from the Capital to see it, and they were the last—after that, there were very few with any interest in surmounting the hill.

It was about ten years earlier that four children from the village had gone missing.

One winter's day, four children vanished from the village—farmer Zarkoff Belan's daughter (eight at the time), fellow farmer Hans Jorshtern's son (aged eight also), teacher Nicholas Meyer's son (aged ten), and general-store proprietor Hariyamada Schmika's son (aged eight). There was some furor over the possibility that it might be the work of a dimension-ripping beast that had been terrorizing the area at the time, but then there were villagers who had seen the four children playing part-way up the hill on the day they went missing. Their disappearance forced the community to eye the ruins with suspicion.

For the first time in fifty years, a suicide squad was formed, but, despite a rather extensive search of the ruins, no clue to the children's whereabouts could be found. Rather, toward the end of a week of searching, members of the suicide squad started disappearing in rapid succession, and the search had to be called off before all the passageways and benighted subterranean chambers that comprised the vast complex of ruins could be investigated.

The grief-stricken parents were told that their children had probably been taken by slave-traders passing by the village, or had been lost to the dimension-ripping beast. Whatever fate awaited the children in either of those scenarios, it was a far more comforting hypothesis than the thought of them disappearing in the remains of a vampire's mansion.

One evening, about two weeks after the whole incident had started, the tragedy came to its grand—if somewhat tentative—finale. The miller's wife was out in the nearby woods picking

lunar mushrooms when she noticed a couple of people trudging down the hill, and she let out a shout fit to knock half the town off its feet.

The children had returned.

That was to be both a cause for rejoicing and a source of new fears.

"For starters, only three of the kids came back." The elderly mayor's voice was so thin, it was fairly lost to the popping of the logs in the fireplace. "You see, Tajeel—that would be Schmika's boy, from the general store—never did come back. To this day we still don't know whatever became of him. Can't say it came as any great surprise when his father and mother both passed away from all their grieving. I'm not saying we weren't glad to get the rest of them back, but maybe if he hadn't been the only one that didn't make it—"

"Did you *examine* the children?" D asked as he turned his gaze toward the door, on guard, no doubt, against any foe who might burst into the room. It was said that even among Hunters, there was an incredible amount of animosity, with hostility often aimed at the more famous and capable. D's eyes were half-closed. The mayor was suddenly struck with the thought that the gorgeous young man was conversing with the night winds through the wall.

"Of course we did," the mayor said. "Hypnosis, mind-probing drugs, the psycho-witness method—we tried everything we could think of. Unfortunately, we used some of the old ways, too. I tell you, even now the screams of those kids plague my dreams. But it was just no use. Their minds were a blank, completely bare of memories for the exact span of time they'd been missing. Maybe they'd been left that way by external forces, or then again maybe it was something the kids' own subconscious minds had pulled to keep them all from going insane. Though if it was the latter, I suppose you'd have to say that as far as Jorshtern's boy went, the results weren't quite what you'd hope for—to this day, Cuore's still crazy as a bedbug.

"The upshot of this is, exactly what happened in the ruined castle and what they might've seen there remains shrouded in mystery. I suppose the only saving grace was that none of them came away with the kiss of the Nobility. Cuore's case was unfortunate, but the other two grew up quite nicely, becoming one of our school teachers and the village's brightest pupil, respectively."

Having progressed this far in his story, the mayor seemed to be finally at ease. He walked over to a sideboard against the wall, got a bottle of the local vintage and a pair of goblets, and returned.

"Care for a drink?"

As he proffered a goblet, his hand stopped halfway. He'd just remembered what dhampirs usually consumed.

As if to confirm this, D replied softly, "I never touch the stuff." The Hunter's gaze then flew to the pristine darkness beyond the window panes. "How many victims have there been, and under what conditions did the attacks occur?"

"Four so far. All close to town. Time-wise, it's always at night. The victims have all been disposed of."

Just then the mayor's voice gave out on him. Surely the ghastly task of their disposal had come back to haunt his memory, for his hand and the drink it held trembled. After all, not every victim had been given a chance to turn into a vampire before they met their end.

"Finding missing kids and *putting 'em down*—this is a nasty bit of business to go through, with spring so close and all."

With a strident *clang*, the mayor slammed the steel goblet down on his desk. The contents splashed up, soaking his palm and the sleeve of his gown.

"It's by no means certain that Schmika's boy Tajeel had a hand in this. There's a very good chance one of the remaining Nobility has slipped in here, or a vampire victim run out of another village is prowling the area. I'd like you to explore those possibilities."

"Do you think there are Nobles who can walk with their victims in the light of day?"

At this softly spoken query, the mayor clamped his lips shut. It was the very question he'd posed to D earlier. Suddenly, the mayor donned a perplexed expression and turned his eyes toward D's waist. Though the sound was faint, he could've sworn he'd heard a strange voice laughing.

"Sometime tomorrow, I need all the information you have on how the victims were attacked, their condition following it, and how they were handled," D said without particular concern. His voice was callous, completely devoid of any emotion concerning the work he was about to undertake. Apparently, this Vampire Hunter knew no fear, even when confronted with a foe the likes of which the world had never known—demons who could walk in the light of day. With an entirely different kind of terror than he felt toward the Nobility, the mayor focused his gaze on the young man's stunningly beautiful visage. "Also, I'd like to pay a visit to the three surviving abductees. If it's any great distance, I'll need a map to their homes."

"You won't need a map," a feminine voice cooed.

The door swung open, and a smiling face like a veritable

blossom drew the eyes of both men.

Eyes that shone with curiosity returned D's gaze, and she said, "Not the least bit surprised, are you? You knew I was standing out there listening in the whole time, I'm sure. I'll tell you all you need to know. Lukas Meyer will be at the school. After classes I can take you to where Cuore lives. And you needn't look far for the third. So, we meet again, D."

Farmer Belan's daughter, now the mayor's adopted child, made a slight curtsy to D.

"Say, are you sure this is okay?" Lina asked the next morning, gripping the reins to the two-horse buggy she drove toward the school.

"Sure *what's* okay?"

"Going out like this first thing in the morning and all. Dhampirs don't like the daytime, right, on account of having part Noble blood in them."

"Just full of weird tidbits, aren't you?" D muttered, looking over the backs of the six-legged mutant-equines. If a telepath had been there, they might've caught a whisper of a grin deep in the recesses of his coldly shuttered but human consciousness.

Inheriting characteristics of both their human and vampire parents, dhampirs were physiologically influenced by both parents in different respects.

Humans slept by night and were awake by day, while the opposite was true for the Nobility. When the genes of the respective races came into conflict, it was generally the physiological traits of the Noble half—the vampire parent—that proved dominant. A dhampir's body craved sleep by day, and wanted to be awake at night.

However, just as a left-handed person could learn through practice to use either hand equally well, it was entirely possible for dhampirs to follow the tendencies of their human genes and live just as mortals did. And, while they might have nearly half the strength, sight, hearing, and other physical advantages of a true vampire, it was that adaptability that was their greatest asset. With that fifty percent, they had a measure of power within them no human being could hope to attain, allowing them to cross swords with the Nobility by day or night.

Still, while it was true they could resist their fundamental biological urges, it was also undeniable that operating in daylight severely degraded a dhampir's condition. Their biorhythms fell off sharply after midnight, reaching their nadir at noon. Direct

sunlight could burn their skin to the point where even the gentlest breeze was pure agony, like needles being driven into each and every cell in their body. In some cases, their skin might even blister like a third-degree burn.

Ebbing biorhythms brought fatigue, nausea, thirst, and numbing exhaustion. Fewer than one in ten dhampirs could withstand the onslaught of midday without experiencing those tortures.

"Still, it looks like you don't have any problems at all. That's no fun." Lina pursed her lips, then quickly hauled back on the reins. The horses whinnied, and the braking board hanging from the bottom of the buggy gouged into the earth.

"What's wrong?" D asked, not sounding the least bit surprised.

Lina pointed straight ahead. "It's those jerks again. And Cuore's with them. Yesterday was bad enough, but now what the hell are they up to?"

Some thirty feet ahead, a group of seven men walked past a crumbling stone wall and turned the corner. Three of them, most notably Haig, Lina and D had met in the ruins the day before.

A young man of seventeen or eighteen dressed in tattered rags walked ahead of the group as the others pushed and shoved him along. He was huge—over six feet tall and weighing more than two hundred pounds. His gaze completely vacant, he continued down the little path, pushed along by a man who barely came up to his shoulder.

"Perfect timing. We were just going to see him. What's down that way anyway?"

"The remains of a pixie breeding facility. It hasn't been used in ages, but rumor has it there's still some dangerous things in there," Lina said. "You don't think those bastards would bring Cuore in there?"

"Get to school."

By the time the last word reached Lina's ears, D was headed for the narrow path, the hem of his coat fluttering out around him.

As soon as he rounded the corner of the stone wall, the breeding facility buildings came into view. Although "buildings" wasn't really the word for them. It appeared the owner had removed all the usable lumber and plastic joists, leaving nothing more than a few desperately listing, hole-riddled wooden shacks that were on the edge of collapse. The winter sun glinted whitely on this barren lot, which was surrounded by naked trees frosted with the last crusts of snow.

The men slipped into one of the straighter structures. They

seemed fairly confident that few people passed this way, as they never even looked back the way they'd come.

Perhaps thirty seconds ticked by.

Shouting exploded from within the building. There were screams. Lots of screams. And not simply the kinds of sounds you make when you encounter something that scares you. Startled, perhaps, by the ghastly cries, the branches of a tree that grew beside the building threw down their snowy covering. There was the cacophony of something enormous shattering to pieces.

Just seconds after the reverberations died away, D entered the building.

The screaming had ceased.

D's eyes took on the faintest tinge of red. The thick smell of blood had found its way to his nostrils.

Every last man was laid out on the stone floor, convulsing in a puddle of their own blood. Aside from a few steel cages along one wall that evoked the building's past as a pixie breeding facility, the vast interior was filled only with the stink of blood and cries of agony. For something that had been accomplished in the half minute the men had been inside with Cuore, the job was entirely too thorough. There could be no doubt that some sort of otherworldly force had completely run amuck.

Two things caught D's eye.

One was Cuore's massive frame, sprawled now in front of the cages. The other was a gaping hole in the stone wall. Six feet or more in diameter, the jagged opening let the morning sunlight fall on the dark floor. Whatever had left the eight strapping men soaking in a sea of blood had gone out that way.

Without sparing a glance to the other young men, D walked over to Cuore. Crouching gracefully, the Hunter said, "They call me D. What happened?"

Muddy blue eyes were painfully slow to focus on D. His madness was no act. The boy's right hand rose slowly and pointed to the fresh hole in the wall. His parched lips disgorged a tiny knot of words.

"The blood . . . "

"What?"

" . . . The blood . . . Not me . . . "

Perhaps he was trying to lay the blame for this massive bloodshed.

D's *left* hand touched the young man's sweaty brow.

Cuore's eyelids drooped closed.

"What did you see in the castle?" D's voice sounded totally unaffected by the carnage surrounding them. He didn't even ask

who was responsible for this bloodbath.

However, could even his left hand pull the truth from the mind of a madman?

A certain amount of "will" seemed to sprout up in Cuore's disjointed expression.

The boy's Adam's apple bobbed up and down, preparing to spill a few words.

"What did you see?" D asked once again. As he posed the question, he reached over his shoulder with his right hand and turned.

The half-dead men were rising to their feet from the floor.

"Possessed, eh?" D's gaze skimmed along the men's feet. The gangly shadows stretching from their boots weren't those of any human. The silhouette of the body was oddly reminiscent of a caterpillar, while the wiry, thin arms and legs were a grotesque mismatch for the torso. Those were pixie shadows!

A single evil pixie who'd been kept here must have escaped and remained hidden somewhere in the factory all this time. Unlike the vast majority of the artificially created beasts the Nobility had sown across the earth, most varieties of pixies were exceptionally amiable. But other varieties, based on goblins, pookas, and imps from ancient pre-holocaust Ireland, kept the people of the Frontier terrified with their sheer savagery. The redcap variety of pookas lopped off travelers' heads with the ax they were born holding, then used their victims' blood to dye the headgear that gave them their name. Few of these creatures possessed the ability to manipulate half-dead humans, but with proper handling they could help make otherwise untamable unicorns clear vast tracts of land, or they could boost the uranium pellet production of Grimm hens from one lump every three days to three lumps a day. In light of this, some of the more impoverished villages on the Frontier were willing to assume the risks of breeding these sorts of creatures. The blood-spattered and still unconscious men were being animated by an individual of the most atrocious species.

The shadow held an ax in its hands.

Smoothly, the weapon rose.

The men each raised a pair of *empty* hands over their heads.

As the nonexistent axes whirred through the space D's head had occupied, the Hunter leapt to the side of the room with Cuore cradled in his arms.

With mechanical steps, the shadow's marionettes went after him.

Unseen blades sank into the wall and dented the roof of an

iron cage. Cutting only thin air, one of the men fell face first and set off a shower of sparks a yard ahead of him.

This was a battle for control of the shadows.

A stream of silvery light splashed up from D's back, then mowed straight ahead at the invisible ax one of the unconscious men raised against him.

There was no jarring contact, but a breeze skimmed by D's cheek and something imbedded in the wall.

These weapons weren't just invisible, they were nonexistent. But deadly nonetheless.

Three howling swings closed on the Hunter, all from different directions. The blades clashed together, but D and Cuore flew above the shower of sparks that resulted.

Twin streaks of white light coursed toward the floor.

The men went rigid and clutched their wrists. Thud after thud rang out in what sounded like one great weight after another hitting the floor. Actually, it was the men *dropping* their weapons.

Having sheathed his longsword, D headed over to one of the men who'd collapsed in a spray of blood.

Going down on one knee by the man's side, he asked, "Can you hear me?"

As the man's feeble gaze filled with the sight of D, his eyes snapped wide open. The fallen man was none other than Haig.

"Dirty bastard . . . How the hell did you . . . ?"

His pitiful voice, which hardly matched his rough face, ground to a halt when he noticed something on the floor.

Now pinned to the stone floor by two stark needles, the unearthly shadow stretching from Haig's feet was rapidly fading from view. Stranger still, it wasn't just the twice-pierced shadow that was affected. The shadows of the other men contorted and writhed in the throes of intense pain. And yet the movements of all remained perfectly synchronized!

It must've taken incredible skill to hurl those needles from midair and nail the shadow precisely through the wrist and heart, but it seemed doubtful someone like Haig could ever truly grasp the amount of focus D needed to perfect such a technique.

Because, amazingly, the needles stuck in the stone were made of wood.

Soon enough, the disquieting shadows vanished and those of the men returned.

"I'm hurting . . . Damn, it hurts! Hurry up, call the doctor . . . please . . . "

"When you've answered my question." D's tone conjured images of ice. Not surprising, as he was dealing with the same

guys who'd already tried to gang-rape an innocent girl. "What happened after you got Cuore in here?"

"I don't know . . . We was thinking one of them's to blame . . . so we planned on taking 'em one by one, smacking 'em around a little to see if we was right . . . and then . . . "

The light in Haig's eyes rapidly dimmed.

"And then what?"

"How the hell should I know . . . ? Get me a doctor . . . quick . . . As soon as we got in here and had 'em surrounded . . . all I could see was blood red . . . *like something was hiding in there* . . . "

The last word out of Haig's mouth became a leaden rasp of breath that rolled across the ground. He wasn't dead. Just unconscious, as the rest of them were as well. Though thin trails of fresh blood leaked from their ears, noses, and mouths, their condition was quite bizarre, given they showed no signs of external injuries.

D turned around.

Cuore stood groggily in the doorway, but much further outside there was the sound of numerous footsteps getting closer. Either Lina or one of the villagers who had seen the Youth Brigade with Cuore must have summoned the law. Apparently the bullying these young men did was far from appreciated in these parts.

D glanced at Cuore, then quickly spun to face the hole blown through the wall.

"What's wrong? Aren't you gonna keep grilling him? You'll never get to the bottom of this mess if you're afraid of stepping on the sheriff's toes," chided a voice from nowhere in particular.

The voice didn't faze D in the least. He and his black coat melted into the morning sun.

THE ONE WHO GETS TO LEAVE

CHAPTER 2

"Lina, you have something on your mind?"

Sensing the ring of suspicion underlying his mild tone, Lina hurriedly turned her attention to the teacher before her. His youthful, gentle face wore a smile. Who would have believed a boy that disappeared into the ruins of a Noble's castle for a fortnight would grow up to be such a man?

"I called you into the teachers' room because you've been staring off into space all day long, and then you go and pull the same thing in here—what the heck's going on? We haven't got the official word yet, but the exam board from the Capital will be here in less than a week."

Along with Lina, he was one of the three children who'd returned safely after the four of them had disappeared—Lukas Meyer. Following in his father's footsteps, he worked as a teacher for the Department of Higher Education in the village. He was Lina's homeroom teacher, though there was actually only one class in the department of higher education and less than fifty students in that.

"It's, uh, nothing . . . really." Lina pawed at her hair and worked at concealing the blood rising in her face. Wild horses couldn't drag out of her the fact she'd taken a fancy to a certain man.

"I certainly hope so," Mr. Meyer said with a nod as he held his hands over the decrepit atomic heater whining before them. Suddenly, both his tone and the look in his eyes became grave. "You mustn't forget the responsibility you bear," he said.

His earnest pitch left Lina in reverent silence.

"You're the hope of the village. When winter's over, you've got to take your chance to leave. We're all pulling for you, you know."

"Yes, sir."

"So, the test itself shouldn't be a problem, but have you decided what it is you'll study at the academy in the Capital?" Mr. Meyer's tone had changed. He knew the answer, and though it was a field he'd helped choose, he asked as if not wanting to know.

Lina made no reply.

"Mathematics, wasn't it?" He uttered the words like an

admonishment.

"Yes, sir."

"That's fine. You can't allow yourself to be distracted before the day of the exam. Better you just focus on the future," the teacher said cheerily. Lina smiled as well. There was a knock at the door. Her classmate, Harna, came in.

"What is it?"

The girl's face was flushed crimson, and her eyes were glazed with dreams. Mr. Meyer rose instinctively from his chair of hardwood and hides. For some reason, Lina snapped to attention.

"There's someone here to see you. Someone . . . Well, he's very good-looking . . . "

That meant nothing to the teacher. Knitting his brow for a moment, Mr. Meyer told Harna to send the visitor in. Looking at Lina, he said, "Well then, be careful on your way home. What, is there something else?"

"Not really. It's just the weather's so nice today." Standing by the windows, which had been specially treated to block the blinding glare from the snow, the girl tried to think of some ploy to remain in the room.

"No more so than usual."

"This room's filthy. I could start tidying it up for you today."

When Mr. Meyer's expression became one of deepest concern, Lina thought, *Damn!* A tall figure came through the low doorway, though in doing so he was nearly forced to stoop.

Lina gave a gasp of wonder and caught an involuntary round of introductions while they were still deep in her throat. Watching her, the reason for her suspicious behavior and her scheme to linger became apparent to Mr. Meyer. Sending off Harna, who stood absentmindedly in the doorway, Mr. Meyer inquired if their guest was an acquaintance of Lina's.

"I'm enjoying the hospitality of her home," D said, as he stood by the wall. He was exactly the sort of visitor unwelcome by an educator entrusted with coeds. "I'm D. A Vampire Hunter. And I suppose you can guess from that what brings me here."

Not surprisingly, Meyer's warm, intellectual countenance stiffened. As he invited D to have a seat, the look in his eyes was one he might give to any envoy dispatched to lay bare the dark secret he'd long concealed in his heart.

"No thanks," D said tersely, declining to take a seat. His manner was curt but not entirely disagreeable.

"Lina," the teacher said urgently. What was set to begin was not a tale for a young girl to hear. Lina glanced imploringly at D, then, with a slightly sullen look, she left the room, displeased by

D's indifference.

As soon as the door shut, Mr. Meyer looked gravely at D. There was nobody else in the room.

"If you're staying at Lina's, then I guess you've heard all the particulars from the mayor. To be honest, there are a few things I'd like to know myself. Personally, if there's some sort of connection between these recent events and what happened to us in the darkness-shrouded days of our youth, I want to be there when you find out who or what's behind it all. That's just the way I feel."

Somehow D managed to parry his earnest tone.

"If you have any memory of what happened ten years ago, I'd like to hear it. I only know what the mayor told me."

That he nodded without hesitation testified to the fact that Mr. Meyer's hard expression was in fact without substance.

"I'm sorry to say it, but what you heard from the mayor is probably all there is to tell. One day ten years back we were all playing at the bottom of the hill. Lina said she wanted to pick flowers and make some garlands, and I remember Tajeel—that would be the boy who still hasn't been found—being against the idea, saying it was no fun. In the end we boys had to give in—even at that age women just have this strength—and we set to our irksome task. Even I got a bunch and handed them to Lina, and then . . . "

"What then?"

"I wandered off someplace else, picked a bunch more, and then turned around. That's it. Next thing I knew it was two weeks later and we were halfway down the hill and headed for the bottom. You're aware that every conceivable technique was used to try to restore that portion of our memories, aren't you?"

"There's something I'd like you to have a look at," D said, changing his location for the first time. Approaching a sturdy-looking desk made of thick logs, he took a harpy-quill pen from a penholder fashioned out of a greater dragon's fang. He also tore a page from the block of recycled notepaper.

"What is it?"

"Just something I have trouble with, too." D's expression didn't change as he made two swift strokes with the pen, then thrust the stiff recycled sheet before the teacher's eyes.

"What . . . what exactly is it?" Mr. Meyer turned to give D a dubious look.

"It's nothing. Sorry about that." D balled up the memo page on which he'd scribed a huge cross and tossed it in the trash. The barrel was also of greater dragon bone. A beast like that was sixty

or more feet of unrivaled ferocity, but not a bit of bone or a single tendon went to waste when they fell into the human hands. In a small village like this, the greater dragons were seen more as a way for the villagers to earn their daily bread than as a threat to their lives.

"Have you been up the hill since?"

"No, not me. Nor have I discussed the incident with Lina."

"One more thing. Cuore Jorshtern went mad. Is there anything unusual about you?"

Mr. Meyer forced a smile. "Perhaps my students could give you a more credible response to that. I believe myself to be an ordinary person, but, to be perfectly frank, I can't prove I wasn't at the scene of these recent crimes. I live alone, and it's possible I've been slipping out at night without knowing it. Once the deed was done, I could've destroyed all evidence of my crime, then returned to being an average schoolteacher asleep in his bed till morning. I can't say for sure that's not the case. If Nobility who can walk in daylight really do exist, the victims of such a Noble would have the same physiological characteristics as the assailant —isn't that so?"

D nodded.

When a human fell to the vampire's baleful fangs and was transformed into a demon of the night, common sense dictated that by and large the victim would inherit the characteristic abilities of that Noble when they rose again. The victim of a Noble with the power to assume lupine form would likewise be able to take that feral quadruped shape at will; the Noble who could command certain savage beasts would gain a new servitor with a mastery of animals.

However, just as a newborn baby isn't a carbon copy of one of its parents, there were certain obvious differences in the genetically linked powers. A victim couldn't remain transformed for as long a duration as their master. In addition, while in that altered form physical attributes such as speed, strength, and regenerative ability would all be several ranks lower. These newly made vampires weren't true Nobility, but rather they were little more than pale imitations.

As far as the people of the world were concerned, the most important thing about these pseudo-Nobles was that, whenever one was captured, they could be used to discern the full strength of the true threat—the real Noble. A hundred and fifty years earlier, an official named Summers Montague investigated several hundred cases while traveling across the Frontier. During his investigation, Montague divided the victims of the Nobility into

different classes, and also left behind precise statistics relating to the powers of their masters. Another tome on the subject, *Methods of Discerning Nobility Levels Via Victims and Defensive Countermeasures* by Nobility scholar T. Fisher, was widely read and handed down by the Frontier people, despite the fact the Capital's Revolutionary Government had banned the book.

However, the threat of the Nobility now assailing this small village would add an astonishing new page to humanity's shared knowledge; or, rather, the threat was so grave, it would shake the most basic beliefs people held about the Nobility, undermining the sense of security that allowed people to go about their daily lives. Nobles who walked by day!

"I'm aware that Vampire Hunters have their own special techniques of identifying and classifying the Nobility. I'll spare no effort to assist you. Ask what you like, or try what you will. You see, I still want to know happened up there on the hill, just as much as you do."

There seemed no cause to suspect the sincerity of the young schoolteacher.

D's left hand moved.

The teacher pulled away reflexively as the hand moved toward his brow. The movement was stopped when a knock sounded and a girl with golden tresses came in without waiting for a response. The tray the girl carried was simply a cross-sectional slice of a tree trunk. A pair of metal cups sat on it.

"What's all this? If you've finished cleaning up, go home."

As if the dubious words from Mr. Meyer had flown right past her ears, the girl set the cups on the table, saying, "Here you go." The profile she showed D was flushed carmine.

"I'd say your behavior as hostess leaves something to be desired," Mr. Meyer said in a slightly discontented tone. "Why the blazes is there such a huge difference in what you poured us? I'll have you know the money for the brew we have here at school comes out of my own pocket."

D's cup held more than three times as much drink as the teacher's.

In this village where single-digit temperatures were commonplace in winter, there were no taboos about consuming alcohol during class.

"Umm, well, this was all there was," the coed said, absorbing D in a series of fluttering glances of infatuation. "You're a pretty heavy boozer, Mr. Meyer, and you've drunk our share on the side. And beside, we don't hardly ever get visitors, so we all put our heads together to come up with a plan and I won the draw . . .

What a handsome young man."

"That's enough of your rubbish." Mr. Meyer rose with a look of disgust and herded the young lady toward the exit. Just as he pulled the door open, an avalanche of girls thumped to the floor, and the teacher's eyes nearly shot out of his head.

"What's the meaning of this? Your rudeness amazes me. The lot of you'd better get out right this minute. And tomorrow, it's thirty strokes with the strap for the leader of this little ring!"

"Make it forty for all we care," said one. "Please let us talk with him, too. We want to hear about the world outside, about the Capital."

"No fair, Mr. Meyer," another protested. "You being in here all alone with this gorgeous hunk of man—there's something awful suspicious about that."

"He— hey, don't talk crazy!" Not surprisingly, the normally calm and composed Mr. Meyer lost his head. After all, he was still young. Ordering them to get out, the teacher shut the door in the face of the far-from-cooperative coeds, who were still clamoring as politely as they could for an autograph from D, at the very least.

The teacher mopped his brow and returned to his seat, but his eyes were calmly chuckling despite everything. "I'm sorry you had to see that ugly bit of business. I hope you don't take offense."

Strangely, D gave a shake of his head. The Hunter's mind was something rarely made manifest. Not only that, but even the eerie aura of a dhampir that usually emanated from every inch of him seemed to have waned.

Mr. Meyer was apparently sensitive enough to detect this change, and his tone became infused with familiarity. "You see, it's pretty rare that a traveler calls on our village. Apparently there's something wrong with the weather controller in this sector; spring and summer are fine, but as soon as fall comes the snow flies. And on account of that I don't suppose there's been a visitor—well, a trader or other traveler—that's stayed more than a couple days any given winter. For girls getting to that age, this village is really a pretty harsh place."

"Not just here," D said softly, even as he admired the azure sky beyond the window panes. "It's like that in every little village. But spring will be here soon."

"Yes, spring will come, but they won't leave."

For the first time, D noticed what a gravely dark gaze the young teacher had.

Frontier villages were tiny and poor. Even the smallest shift in population could be disastrous. The life of wringing crops from the nearly depleted soil, and fending off monstrosities that lay in

wait with hungry eyes fixed on human prey, required the strength of every available person, right down to the last reasoning child. The Revolutionary Government in the Capital made reclamation of the Frontier a major item on its agenda; prohibiting any movements of population pending word from the government was an appropriate measure. So, in addition to the snow, another barrier, invisible to all eyes, shut off the wintry village.

"Here's an idea," the teacher said, watching D with new resolve. "If you have some free time while you're in town— "

"I've got other work." The Hunter's reply was icy cold. "I'll finish this as quickly as possible, and leave the village as soon as I'm done. That's all there is to it."

Mr. Meyer said simply, "I see," then drained the contents of his cup. He didn't appear in the least bit resentful. Because teachers were very rarely permitted to move, many of them gave themselves up to alcohol and hallucinogens to escape the despair of the future and the coldness of the present. But, even with the difficulties of the profession, Mr. Meyer was a truly grand individual. "I was asking too much, I know. But before you investigate me, there's one thing I'd like to ask of you."

"What's that?"

"Could you please just leave Lina out of this?"

"She's one of the children who came back, too."

"She's going places."

D's brow crinkled ever so slightly. This, too, was rather uncommon. As if to draw him in further, the teacher went on. "I'm sure you're probably aware of the system whereby once a year the government singles out the most promising child from a given village in that Frontier sector for instruction in the Capital's educational system. This year our village has been selected. I dare say it may never happen again. The whole place was in such a state you'd think the carnival had come to town. After months of skill tests, Lina was the unanimous choice."

"I see."

"We're just a poor little village struggling to survive, but she's a shining star rising for the Capital. Rumor has it the government might even be planning to launch one of those galactic energy propulsion ships to another planet. If she's picked for something like that, she might well become a star in every sense of the word. Imagine . . . a girl from a village locked in long, dark winter for half the year and graced by the sun for a scant spring and summer might travel to the stars. Can you understand how proud that would make us, what a boost it would be?"

"If the selected child makes such a contribution, the village is

due remuneration of some sort. That much I understand." Saying this, D fixed his eyes on Mr. Meyer's face. "Do you think you serve the best interest of the village, too?"

As Mr. Meyer's proper countenance hardened at this unanticipated query, a ghastly aura gushed from every inch of D.

"Huh?!" Frozen by what seemed a brutal assault on his deepest psyche, the teacher followed D's gaze, caught by the sight of a pupil rushing for the gate to the school, which was visible from the window. Beads of sweat clung to the boy's face. His hands were stained scarlet.

The teacher understood in an instant.

When he rose to follow D, who had already slipped through the doorway, he heard a bizarre, hoarse voice say, "Put on hold again? It's just one interruption after another today."

A dozen minutes later, Mr. Meyer was scampering through the woods. There was neither sight nor sound of D, who'd gone before him.

The well-drained road was dry and bare but for the occasional chunk of remaining snow, so the Hunter's running was unhindered and his speed was superhuman. Entrusting the blood-smeared youth to one of the elementary schoolteachers who'd joined him out on the school grounds, Mr. Meyer had gone after D. Having left the building ahead of the teacher, the Hunter had raced off after exchanging a few words with the boy. At that point he'd been less than ten feet away. *Even the wind itself is afraid to stand in the way of this gorgeous youth*, the teacher thought.

Here and there, bloodstains dotted the black road. These had dripped from the hands of the boy. He was the son of a huntsman who lived in the woods not far from the edge of town. Fooling with a homemade crossbow on his way home from school, he'd accidentally shot a quarrel into a thicket. He found it soon enough, and with it something else. The next thing he knew he was at the gates of the school, he said. He didn't know when he'd managed to get blood all over his hands. He was just a boy of nine.

Mr. Meyer could see the thicket ahead. Crimson snow sat on the boughs. Finding a narrow break, Mr. Meyer forced his way through.

His legs froze.

Before he knew it, his whole being was being hammered by an aura lurid to the extreme, awakening a primeval fear in each and every one of his cells. Though his mind demanded he move

forward, his body rebelled. Man was not an animal of unified spirit and flesh.

Roughly ten feet ahead of him stood D.

And another six feet beyond the Hunter lay a corpse, face down and clad in red fur. He couldn't see the face, but from the long, ponytailed hair he knew it was a woman. There was nothing else, and no one else, to be seen.

Despite that, the teacher got the distinct impression that the body itself emanated the unnerving sense of evil that was crushing him like a vise. He wondered if D, too, had fallen victim to it. But no . . .

D had already unsheathed his longsword. The pose he took, with the tip of his blade low enough to prick the end of his right foot, was so unnatural it could hardly be called a fighting stance. But by extension, it suggested that whatever tact he took next was going to be positively unearthly.

And then the teacher noticed something that made joy buoy up in his withered heart. While the malicious aura was eddying all about D, it hadn't so much as touched the Hunter.

He wasn't the least bit afraid of it!

The evil aura over the girl moved. It pounced!

D flew through the air, too. He was the veritable image of a graceful hawk, chiseled in all its majesty in the chill air.

The teacher saw only a silver flash.

Space and time twisted—at least that was the way it felt.

Something slipped by the teacher's side, burst through part of the thicket, and vanished. Mr. Meyer ran toward D, who had landed by the girl's side. The spell was now broken, and only an air of cold tranquility spread through the area. They could even hear the chirping of birds again.

Going down on one knee beside the girl, D took her pulse. His expressionless face didn't so much as glance off to where the thing, whatever it was, had fled. And his sword was in its scabbard. The teacher felt like he was looking at an entirely different form of life. Though the youth was gorgeous enough to make even another man like Meyer swoon, the Hunter seemed even more fearfully unsettling than the thing with its aura of malevolence had been.

Dropping the girl's hand, D rose. He pressed the palm of his left hand to his right arm. When the teacher asked him if he'd been injured, he shook his head. "Seems we got here just in time," the Hunter said.

Relief spread through the teacher's chest. "You think *that thing* was what you're looking for?" he asked hopefully, but

consternation quickly knit his brow.

"No," D said. "Judging by the temperature of the body and her drying blood, she was attacked this morning. What's more, that nasty just now left no teeth marks on her throat. It seems I ran across it almost as soon as it found the woman."

"What the blazes was that thing anyway?"

"I don't know. But this is the second time I've run into it."

"What?"

"Never mind that—this woman, would you happen to know her?"

At last Mr. Meyer could be of some small use. He rolled the woman, who had two threads of vermilion trailing from the nape of her neck, onto her back. Seeing the small basket lying nearby, he nodded.

"She's married to a farmer by the name of Kaiser. Must've been out picking aluminon blossoms for salves when she was attacked."

"And where were you this morning? You don't have to answer that. We'll know who the culprit is soon enough."

"We will?"

"Based on her wounds, whoever attacked her is the sort that gets very attached to its prey. It'll probably go after her again tonight. I'll keep watch. If it doesn't come . . . "

Feeling that he should be terrified by the sentence D left unfinished, the young teacher said in a hollow voice, "If it doesn't come *what*?"

"Then it would have to be someone who knows I'm here. Those students who saw me earlier were unaware of my profession, so that just leaves the mayor, Cuore, Lina, . . . and you."

Even though the season was so near to spring, Mr. Meyer's face had all the color of someone who'd died of exposure.

Before long, the sheriff and mayor hurried to the scene and carried Kaiser's wife off after a purely perfunctory investigation. The sheriff stared at D with suspicion, but he said nothing. For his part, D made no mention of the invisible entity.

D alone remained at the scene. When all the others had taken their leave, he said to the palm of his left hand, "What kind of shape are you in?"

"Not too good, as you might expect," came an exhausted voice in reply. "That was a hell of a lot of psychic juice to get hit with at once. I won't be back up to snuff for four, maybe five days. As for me getting down deep into those three returnees, that's

completely out of the question. I couldn't get an order through to their subconscious, or even to the uppermost layer of their consciousness for that matter."

"That's a problem."

"If it is, it's your own fault for always driving me like a slave. Sometime today or tomorrow you'll need to feed me *the big four*."

"How about now? Is that why you're still hanging around?"

"Hmm . . . think I'll take a little nap first."

"Fine."

The bizarre dialogue concluded and D left the scene of the tragedy. The winter sun was still high. D chose the shade as he walked. That there wasn't even a tinge of weariness marring his beauty was truly astounding.

Irrespective of the weather, during the daylight hours those of vampire lineage craved rest at a basic physiological level. If it were merely a matter of remaining conscious, they could do so for up to eight hours if they confined themselves to a place where the sun virtually never shone. But if they engaged in any walking or standing around in sunlight, after four hours they'd lapse into a near-death state. Super Grade A Vampire Hunters could barely manage five to six hours of full activity. Their exhaustion was entirely different from that felt by a human working all night long, and it was solely because of this major weakness in the Hunters that the human wish to have all the Nobility exterminated remained unfulfilled.

Nearing the edge of the forest, D's steps came to a sudden halt. There was Lina, waiting for him in a wagon. D silently took a seat riding shotgun and the wagon sped off.

After a while D said, "If you're headed home, you're going the wrong way."

"Not a problem. See, we're headed for the happiest spot in the whole village."

Presently the wagon left the far end of the village and came to the highway, where it halted before a tiny shack facing the road. A sturdy-looking but rough wooden bench had been crammed into the space, and snow had drifted into the lampless interior.

"The bus stop," Lina said brightly. "It's the only station leading out of town. The winters are impassable, but in another five days the electric bus will be by. And that morning, I'll be on the first one out of here."

"Seems you're bound for the Capital."

"Aren't you happy for me?!"

As the glint in the black pupils trained directly on him, D made a slightly awkward expression. "You certainly are an odd girl.

Why would you say that?"

"How should I know?"

D looked puzzled.

"Just kidding," Lina said, after the fashion of a sister explaining the workings of a sleight-of-hand to her bewildered kid brother.

D was silent. The warrior who evoked shudders from the bloodsucking Nobility was completely at the mercy of a girl barely seventeen years of age. There was nothing he could do. If Mr. Meyer or the mayor of the village could have seen him then and noticed how the terrific unearthliness which was rightfully his had faded, their eyes would have popped right out of their heads.

"Hey, how come you don't smile? Do you think it'd kill you to laugh?"

At this coquettish query, D once again was at a loss for a reply. This young lady was a severe challenge.

"But you do cry, don't you? There must be a lot of hard times, aren't there. I just know there are."

With some difficulty he managed to say simply, "Yeah."

Lina suddenly became very serious. "You've got some sort of connection to the Nobility, don't you? You don't have to say anything; I just know. The mayor wouldn't tell me anything, but not so much as a bird goes near you. And look! Even though you walk normally, the tracks you leave in the snow aren't a third as deep as mine. Then there's the ruins . . . "

Lina faltered.

"What about the ruins?"

Watched by icily gleaming eyes, Lina realized that her cheeks had suddenly become hot. As if she was just now noticing that the youth before her was a man of such beauty it made her hair stand on end.

"I hid behind you, remember?" Even her tone of voice had a blush to it. "The first time I saw you I was really scared, but as soon as I heard what you said I shook it right off. 'While it's impossible to halt the progress of time, you would do well to show some respect for what's been lost'—when you said that, you seemed so sad."

This young lady must have heard the echoes of another world, echoes that no one else could hear.

"You've got good ears and an excellent memory," D said in his usual tone, looking to the highway. "The sun will be down in a little while, so we'd best be on our way. It's about time for the fiend to make another move on the woman from this morning."

"Hey," Lina rasped in a tone entirely inappropriate to the

situation, poking meaningfully at D with her elbow. “Could you get your work done in the next five days and leave the village with me? I’ve got an awful bright future ahead of me.”

“Maybe. Better get in now.”

The pair clambered into the wagon and D took the reins in hand.

Stealing glances at his profile, Lina sported a mischievous grin. “You really don’t want to lose that scowl, do you, you big worrywart? I’m going to make a prediction for you.”

“A prediction?”

Perhaps knowing how D’s eyes glinted and perhaps not, Lina ceremoniously shut her lids and twitched her nose as if tasting the air. “That’s right. See, mine are almost always right on the money. Let’s see . . . okay, I got it.”

Then, gazing upon the beautiful profile beside her as if entranced, she said, “You’ll definitely be wearing a smile when you leave this place.”

Eight faces surrounded a single cot.

There was the sheriff and mayor, Mr. Meyer and Lina, three strapping members of the Vigilance Committee, and standing all alone with his back to the wall was D.

“Haven’t you caught that Cuore yet?” the mayor asked the sheriff in very ill humor, and the sheriff looked in turn to the powerfully built individual who seemed to lead the local vigilantes. His name was Fern.

“Well, he’s not holed up in his usual rat’s nest,” Fern stated. “But we got the Vigilance Committee and Youth Brigade out in full force, and I expect we’ll have him in no time.”

“If we have him here and a vampire shows up, it should clear up any doubts about the three of them. Get it done,” the mayor added, hurling an arrogant look at Lina and Mr. Meyer. Fern nodded deeply in agreement and looked over at D. Glaring hatred eddied like a whirlpool. He must’ve heard about the two minor altercations with Haig and his Youth Brigade.

“Visiting hours are about to begin. You’ll all have to step into the next room.”

While the others rose at D’s bidding, all three vigilantes turned their sullen faces away. His gelid gaze focused on them, and, though their eyes never met his, the way they suddenly left their seats suggested their backs had turned to ice.

“You can count on us to keep an eye on these other two. But are you sure you’ll be okay on your own?” The sheriff’s words

sprang from the fear that if by some chance D was defeated, the curse of the undead wouldn't just claim the woman, but that more victims would follow as well.

It really didn't matter what happened to the woman. The treatment of vampire victims varied from village to village, but here they were promptly driven out of town and left to their fate. Her husband had gone off to a neighboring village, but he was bound by the same laws they all were, so the sheriff didn't have to worry about any censure.

However, this new Vampire Hunter planned to use the woman as bait to draw the demon. What's more, the Hunter didn't want the trio still under suspicion in the same room, but rather asked that they all wait together close by.

If not for the support of the mayor, the sheriff surely would have railed against this. There had been more than a few cases in the past when similar plans had failed, and those lying in wait hadn't been the only ones to fall to the baleful fangs—whole villages had gone vampire. But, above all else, there was the salary the sheriff drew from the Capital to consider, a sum nearly five times what the average villager earned. It wasn't the sort of job he'd just hand to someone else.

"Trust me, Sheriff," the mayor said, clapping him on the shoulder. "After all, I called in just the man for the job."

In his mind, he muttered, *You called in the last Hunter, too*. But, without wasting another word, the sheriff led the whole group into an adjacent room.

As soon as the click of the lock died, D curled his right hand into a loose fist, put it to his mouth, and aimed the scant opening at the lamp on the side table. With a puff of his breath, the flame burning within the glass of the hurricane lamp was extinguished. The room fell to the mastery of the dark.

Lowering clouds obscured the moon this eerie night, as wintry gales incomprehensible so near to spring rattled the window frames.

The woman lying in the cot was the same one who had been attacked earlier. Though she'd been unconscious since they'd found her, with the deepening of night her skin had lost its rosy hue; her face was now strangely imbued with the luster of paraffin. In that darkness unmarred by any spark of light, D could discern even the paling blood vessels lacing the woman's cheeks.

Suddenly he spun toward the window.

There was naught but the rattle of the wind's incessant blows to be heard, but D's ears must have caught some other sound.

At the same time, his gaze returned to the bed.

From the nape of the woman's neck—and the wound known as the Kiss of the Nobility—two vermilion rivulets began a trickling flow.

The tension was like a line snapped taut.

Something jet black pressed against the window pane. A face with both nose and mouth mashed flat was peering into the room, vested with a grin that was not of this world.

With a dull flutter, something thick flew through the air. A blanket.

D's gaze was drawn to the door that was the boundary between this room and the next. That was where the nightshirt-clad woman was headed. Eyes as red as blood shone on D. The call had come from her master.

A vampire could beckon to its prey without actually going to see them, moving their victim by sheer will alone. It was a commonly used ploy. However, normally the victim would leave by a window. The vampire certainly wouldn't send the victim all the way to the front door, where they'd most likely run into other people. What's more, there had been a lurid figure outside the window. Was that a diversion?

The woman took a step back and made ready to ram her way through the door. D sprinted. With a piercing shriek, the window panes flew outward in shards and a sudden gust of wind rushed in.

Screams arose in the next room.

D could discern each and every individual noise. Even before the woman could smash herself against the door, something in the next room made the door buckle out from the inside. Screws shot from the hinges. A concussive blast erupted, and splintery chunks of the door ripped into the wooden floor, blowing shards of the broken windows outward. All without a sound.

The woman was now in a corner of the room. A guttural cry had been heard, but it had died in the shadows of a black coat. Just as the door splintered, D had taken the woman under his arm and leapt to safety. And it had taken less than a second for the buckling door to fly to pieces. His speed was ungodly.

It seemed that *it* had appeared for a third encounter with D.

The room swam with intense psychic power as the thing sought out its opponent with a raging, unvoiced howl. Strangely enough, D could even make out the thing's body.

The head faced D and the woman.

Coagulated malevolence. Raising itself on all four limbs, it charged forward menacingly.

Looking askance at the woman rendered senseless by the ramming, D drew his longsword. What followed was an unanticipated ending.

With a scream that thundered outside the window, the malevolence was utterly dispelled. The growls of the night wind reverberated, but D just stood there confused in the normal winter air.

This just wasn't right. It was impossible for such a fierce aura to disperse, to just disappear. Fragments of it—the remaining energy alone—should've hung in the air like gaseous clots. But there wasn't the faintest trace of anything like that left in the room. The best course of action, at this point, would be to believe the thing hadn't existed in the first place.

Instead of mulling this over, D sprung to work. Running his eyes over the devastated door and fallen woman, he hurled himself out the window.

The source of the cries was lying on the ground just below the window ledge. The Hunter rolled him over, revealing Cuore's pale countenance. His chest rose and fell faintly under his bedraggled garments. Though there was no bleeding or wounds, his colossal frame looked withered from head to toe. His cheeks sank haggardly, starkly tracing the bones beneath. It looked as if the very essence of life had been torn out of him.

D was just about to scoop the man up when the Hunter's body flew instead through the air and back into the room.

An ash-gray figure entirely bound in dark fabric clung to the woman. A scarf of rough cloth shrouded the figure's face, and, from the core of that countenance, eyes the color of blood stared back at D. The woman didn't move in the slightest. An expression of rapture at the taste of otherworldly pleasure suffused her waxen visage, and her ample and now naked breasts were mashed against the chest of the shadowy figure. Yes, even her supple thighs had been bared and were now twined around the figure's legs. The ravager and the ravaged painted an image of secret lasciviousness.

The instant D spied the pair of fangs jutting from the corners of the creature's detestable lips—the only part of the figure clearly

visible as he nosily lapped at the blood bubbling from the wounds on the woman's throat—the Hunter's right hand unleashed a volley of white light.

As the sound of five wooden needles sinking into the planks of the wall was heard, those bloody lips formed a grin. Not a single change had occurred in the figure's twisting embrace of the woman. Without moving a muscle, the creature had avoided the needles D had hurled.

D bounded from the floor.

The wan body of the woman flew up, and averting it introduced a delay of a mere hundredth of a second in his attack. A flash of silver slashed the sleeve of the ashen cloak, and D and the figure swapped positions.

An air of desolation filled the room.

At long last he'd met a worthy opponent. In any battle, the most important factors were, primarily, speed and, secondarily, strength. In terms of speed, at least, the shadowy figure was D's equal.

However . . .

From the throat of that figure, a moan which could never be mistaken for human came as if borne on the wintry wind itself.

A splash of black seemed to make a smooth streak from the upper edge of the figure's scarf down to the chin. The rent fabric fell away to either side, draping over the shadowy figure's shoulders. It was the work of D's blade, which in truth should have split his opponent's body in half. Not losing a second, the figure shielded his face with his hand and leapt out the window.

D ran as well.

The distance between the two remained unchanged.

A shooting star in silver!

With one of the most exquisite sounds in the world, D's blade was parried by the longsword the figure wielded. Like the scattering sparks, the two faces grew fainter and farther apart.

At the same time they landed, a series of noises echoed in the space between them. Iron caltrops the figure had launched in midair as he gripped his sword in his teeth had intercepted the needles thrown by D.

Each caltrops was a mass of iron spikes radiating out in all directions. Though traditionally spread across the ground by ordinary huntsmen or Hunters specializing in land-bound beasts, with practice they might be used as missiles. An expert could hurl three in a single second and pack them in a two-inch-wide bull's-eye from a distance of some thirty feet. When coupled with the horrendous strength unique to the Nobility, caltrops could achieve

the stopping power of a magnum gun—a weapon renowned for its ability to pierce the armor of greater dragons.

A streak of crimson coursed down D's left cheek.

But the shadowy figure who'd dealt the wound slammed on the brakes as well. He backed off. Perhaps the moon finally peeping through the bank of clouds had revealed to the figure the fact the left hand he held over his face had lost its thumb clear down to the base.

The opponents held their longswords at eye level, in the tradition of Asian fencers. Preparing for battle, neither moved.

Borne on a wind that howled of winter's imminent demise, no one could say how long this battle to the death between a superhuman and a demonic fiend would go on.

A deafening report called a sudden close to the duel.

D's upper body jolted ever so slightly. The tension was broken. About to make a thrust, the figure halted. An instant later, the figure leapt through the air, cleared a stone wall, and melted into the darkness with a speed that shamed the wind itself.

Not that the figure feared the gunfire which had just put two rounds into D's body. Rather, the figure had seen D take the massive slugs through the side of his chest without letting the point of his sword quaver in the least bit.

The especially strong wind scattered all trace of the enemy, so D limned a fluid arc of silver that returned his longsword to its sheath. On the right flank of his coat the material was rent wide, marking the spot where a magnum gun had scored a pair of direct hits, but there was no trace of emotion whatsoever in his exquisite face.

A tangle of angry shouts came from the direction of the window. The voices of Lina and the mayor churned against vehement protests from the sheriff that it had been an accident that his shots had gone wide.

D approached Cuore's weakened body and lifted the boy effortlessly. Though the most distinguished Hunters were renowned for never using their sword arm unless it was absolutely necessary, D coolly disregarded that convention.

"No use giving chase," he said to keep the sheriff from clambering out through the window. "What about the woman?"

"She's still alive," Lina replied from her place at the bedside of the sleeping woman.

D climbed back into the room without a sound.

"Get this boy to bed."

"Weren't you hit?" the sheriff asked as he alternated his stares between the weapon in his hands and D. Without responding, the

Hunter passed Cuore into Lina's arms.

"D, you're bleeding!"

"It'll heal soon enough. What happened?"

"I don't know." Shaking her head, Lina looked at the sheriff. He seemed unharmed. There was a large lump rising on the mayor's forehead. "Something happened, that's for sure—all of a sudden we're floating in midair, then the next thing I know we're dropping to the floor headfirst. Believe you me, I'd like to know what the hell that was all about!"

"What about Mr. Meyer?"

"Over here . . . " The speaker was slumped by the threshold of the shattered door, breathing heavily. There were a number of scratches on his cheeks. Judging by the way he held the back of his head, that was the severest of his injuries. "At least this should get rid of any lingering doubts about me and Lina," he muttered, then his eyes went wide as he saw Cuore.

The trio of vigilantes tottered toward them, and, in the wild confusion of the room, D could be heard murmuring as if nothing at all had occurred. "So we've finally flushed it out, have we?"

THOSE WHO DESIRE DARKNESS

CHAPTER 3

The pale rays of the sun had melted most of the light snow on the slope. Young sprouts raised their heads from the ground, diligently drawing to themselves the energy they would need to send out shoots in the season to come.

Like a pastoral painting, green already covered the gently rolling terrain, and off in the distance a young Adonis stood in stark relief against the blue sky, walking as the wind fluttered the hem of his coat.

One only had to draw a step closer, however, to be struck by the ineffable eldritch aura swelling from that tall, black-clad form to realize he was an otherworldly entity thoroughly in keeping with that perfectly preserved beauty.

Vampire Hunter D—in spring, in summer, his emotionless eyes reflected a demon-haunted darkness.

Halfway up the slope D stopped.

A wagon was approaching from town. It was Lina, with her black manelike hair streaming out behind her. Realizing that D had caught sight of her, a smile suffused her face and she waved.

While he didn't wave back, it was still unlike the youth to wait while Lina halted the wagon, gathered up her long, blue skirt, and climbed up the hill to him. It seemed not just humans, but all living creatures had difficulty traversing the hill.

"What brings you out here?" he asked with a dour look.

"Oh, aren't you Mister Personality. It just so happens I was going to ask you the very same thing. But the least I can do is keep you company. After all, you were kind enough to wait for me and all."

Though her breath was ragged, an untroubled grin rose on Lina's lips.

It wasn't just that the young man was so gorgeous he gave her gooseflesh, but also that she found standing by his side fun—or if "fun" wasn't exactly the right term, standing by him was certainly intriguing. Lina had no way of knowing what a mighty Hunter he was, or how the roughest characters on the Frontier cringed at the mere mention of his name. She was seventeen—girls at that stage tended to view boys their own age as punk kids, which is probably how Lina saw D. But, appearances to the contrary, who could

really say just how old the Hunter was, springing as he did from the ageless and undying blood of the Nobility?

"I wasn't exactly waiting for you," D said frostily. "I was going to tell you to turn around. You should go home."

"Not a chance," Lina pouted. "I'm a lot safer with you than I'd be back in town."

That was certainly true.

"Have it your way."

D turned without another word. Though his leisurely yet deliberate pace remained unchanged, no matter how Lina scrambled she could not close the gap between them. On reaching the summit of the hill she collapsed in the shade of the ramparts. Cruel as it may seem, D immediately slipped into the ruins without so much as a backward glance, and was gone.

"I don't believe this! Of all the cold-blooded— " Lina was shouting and stomping her feet when something white fell from her breast. Hurriedly snatching it up, she brushed it off gently and slipped it into the front of her blouse. And then, with a cry of, "Wait for me, you cold-hearted ninny," she slipped through a breach into the ruins.

Humans remained afraid to enter the castles of the Nobility. Their owners having disappeared for reasons unknown, the homes and the untended grounds were usually overrun by weeds and rats. In some cases automated maintenance devices had broken down, in others the Nobility had disconnected them before they vanished. Such actions seemed to state that these were still places no human hand should ever touch. Seeing these ruins with that in mind was enough to send chills climbing the viewer's spine.

Ramparts not withstanding, the main gate and tabernacle, which had once been the principal edifices here, were all blown from their foundations. Even the pitiful figure of the belfry, top half now lost, glared at the blue empyrean vault. Stony heaps of rubble and the remains of buildings formed from mysterious materials were scattered throughout the snow-covered central courtyard. The courtyard also barely retained its original shape, though it did an excellent job now of slowing Lina's pace.

Of course, Lina didn't know when the castle had been reduced to this state, or by whose hand. All that was shrouded by the dark veil of history, and, aside from the tentacles of unknown terror it sent out, this place had no relation to the humans' existence.

Even within, the history of these ruins remained elusive. Every part of it was a mystery.

A great many castles had been built by the Nobility in the Frontier region, all of them for the express purpose of providing a

base from which they could rule over the mortals. The Nobility usually chose a spot on high ground to build their castles, so they might look down and see the humans toiling at their feet. Consequently, descriptions of those castles, and tales of their tenants, became part of the oral tradition of the humans who worked below. The stories were inevitably passed down through the ages, but nothing like that had happened in the village of Tepes.

How the Nobility had lived, and what work they had undertaken in this valley locked in by snow and darkness, were questions the villagers did not want to consider.

D was in the darkness of the same hall where Lina first met him. At the sight of him silently studying something on the wall, Lina got the distinct impression the pale blue stream of time had ceased to flow.

"One of those pictures strike your fancy?" she called out as she approached. D, who hadn't answered no matter how she'd shouted, turned toward her. At last she could relax a bit.

"Oh, yes, I have to remember you can climb up here normally. You come here often, do you?"

"Uh-huh," she said with an affirming nod. "When it comes to the castle here, I'd have to say I'm the best-informed person in town. You know, I'm not sure what you came here for, but why don't we look at some of these together?"

For the briefest instant, D scanned the face of the innocuously grinning girl, then nodded.

The two of them played their gaze across one piece after another in the prodigious collection of paintings set in the walls.

As she looked at these paintings, all made sufficiently mysterious by the mere fact they'd been left behind, Lina felt the same profound emotion as the first time she'd seen them. Her breast flooded with heat as she looked at them anew.

Lovers, wrapped in the gossamer wings of some flying machine, gliding through the pale shadows of a moonlit grove.

A wan Noblewoman laughing as she chases a glowing, moonlike orb through the thick fog of a lakeshore.

A black-clad Noble spurring on the unearthly beast that draws his hover-carriage, while flashes of lightning from the eddying pitch-dark sky bathe them both.

Moonlight glinting off the horn of a unicorn, prismatic dancing girls scattering flower petals, the land is transformed to a garden of luminescent grasses in those paintings, which showed shadow and light, symphonies of light and shadow . . .

"Nobles painted all of these?"

Lina did not address this question to anyone in particular, but it felt like a song ringing from her mouth.

"The setting is always darkness and blackness, night and moonlight and mist—so why do they look so gorgeous? How could they paint that world so softly, so surreal, when *we* can't set foot outside the village without getting so scared we collapse in a heap? Is the Nobility's night somehow different from ours?"

D watched the girl silently. Her eyes were big and bright and sparkling with an abounding curiosity that stripped away the veil of innocuousness—this girl of seventeen who would learn about the future in the Capital.

"From the time we're little kids we all grow up hearing about how fierce the Nobility are, how frightening," Lina continued, forgetting that D stood by her side. "Civilization doesn't produce anything that isn't fit to serve it. That's why the evil Nobility have died off, they say. And yet, when I look at these paintings, my heart races. The first time I saw them I even thought, 'If this is what they can paint, then make me a Noble any day.' After that, I studied up on them on the sly. Mr. Meyer, who was missing with me way back when, well, he's interested in the Nobility, too, and since he's collected all sorts of literature he's loaned me a couple of books—though lately he's been telling me to just buckle down on the math and he won't let me have any more. For the most part, they're all things humans have recorded about Nobility and pretty much all of them were from the same point of view the grownups in town have, but there was this one volume, a book about the history of the Nobility. Oh, what was it called now . . . "

"*Dawn of the Nobility,* by J. Sangster. It was banned as soon as it saw print, and the author was exiled to the Frontier."

"I'm impressed. That's exactly the one I meant!"

Lina snapped her fingers sharply, not so much surprised that a drifting Hunter would know such an arcane tidbit as she was delighted to find a thread for conversation.

"As I recall, it analyzed art the Nobility had left behind—paintings and holographic images and three-dimensional music of some sort—and brought some of their civilization's finer points to light. I read it and reread it till it was falling apart. I wanted to learn about the other world, the night civilization, and the Nobility of course. About the knowledge they had and their beauty. And I . . . "

At this point the girl's words died as if she were returning to her senses, and she turned again to face D.

"It's already been decided I'm to study mathematics in the Capital. But what I'd really like to get into is the history of the

Nobility."

For a while, the pair stood studying each other's faces as they felt the crush of the darkness.

"Just kidding," Lina laughed suddenly, like the gust that snuffs a candle. "Oh, it's true I want to study their history, but as a candidate I have to get up in front of a panel from the Capital and state for the record just what I intend to major in. Math, physics, music, art—hell, I could even choose gymnastics and they'd be fine with it. But if I ever said anything about the history of the Nobility . . . "

Lina didn't have to say that it would mean the end of her hopes for the future. History had been penned in the blood of those crushed by an unbearable weight of fear, and the oppressed would never forgive that.

"Well," D began, "I hear policies in the Capital are gradually changing. It seems the director of the Ministry of Education is a man with some appreciation of the Nobility's heritage."

"Not a chance," Lina laughed mischievously, flitting behind D like a butterfly. "I'm not about to lose my only ticket out of this town. The final decision rests on the feelings of the panel, you know. I'm going to tell them 'mathematics,' and that's that."

D said nothing in reply, but turned to face a painting several yards distant.

It was a picture Lina herself had always wondered about. Of all the paintings left behind, only this one had had its entire ten-foot-high, six-and-a-half-foot-wide surface painted over pitch-black. It seemed to radiate the most sinister intent.

"I recall seeing this sort of thing a couple of times in my travels. Out of tens of thousands of paintings, hundreds of thousands of pieces of art, I've found an oddity like this mixed in from time to time. Some have been completely destroyed, some have been burned. Of them all, only one had ever been restored again."

Though Lina was unaware that having this youth relate his personal experiences was not only unparalleled but bordered on the miraculous, her eyes sparkled nonetheless.

"Don't keep me in suspense. What's the painting of?"

"Nobles rising from their coffins, their hands reaching for the sun."

The most fruitless of dreams.

Who could've painted it, Lina wondered.

Who painted it, who ruined it, who restored it? Could this painting

here be another? Did the Nobility really want to be like us?

There were no answers.

Unbeknownst to her, the hem of her skirt had begun to flutter. There was a breeze coming in from somewhere.

"Why did you tell me that, D?" Lina inquired softly. "You say I'm strange, but if so I guess that makes you plain *loony*. No matter what I ask you, I know you won't give me an answer, but there's one thing I'd like to know just the same. When I first met you, mister big bad Vampire Hunter, you were here looking at the paintings, weren't you? Are you sure you *really* hate the Nobility?"

D looked back into the darkness.

"I've wasted more time than I intended. Time for me to get back to work, so wait outside."

"Not on your life. Not after coming this far. I'm going with you —it's as simple as that."

"You're on your own if anything happens. I won't bail you out."

"No, you'll save my bacon sure enough. I'm your valued assistant, after all."

"Hey, don't fool yourself," D shot back with agitation. Lina was something of an expert at causing miracles.

"For the time being, kindly tell me what brings you to these ruins, Boss," she said with a grave face. D heaved a sigh. Once again, it looked like a mere slip of a girl had him right where she wanted him.

"To find out just what happened here ten years ago."

"Knew it," Lina said with a heavy-hearted nod. "No matter how you look at it, there's something strange about us. There's no way Nobles are walking around in broad daylight. And then there's the shape Cuore's in."

While the boy had regained consciousness that morning, his physical strength was depleted to a phenomenal degree, and he hadn't responded to questioning by the mayor and sheriff.

It was extremely difficult to believe he'd just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time during that incident the night before. Even if he'd heard about the attack on the woman, which was unlikely—everyone involved in the case had been urged to keep silent—he'd still been the object of a manhunt by the entire Youth Brigade. Well, it went without saying they'd thoroughly searched the area surrounding the house. And, the creature that for lack of a better name could be called a "spirit-beast," had appeared on one other occasion when Cuore was also present.

"Even now everyone still suspects us. It's common knowledge me and Cuore can climb the hill *normally*, and I bet Mr. Meyer

wouldn't have any trouble, either. And you know, all three of us have been attacked by goons from the local Youth Brigade, just because they think we might be the Nobles who walk by daylight."

"You're lucky you haven't been hurt."

"That's on account of the mayor. He's the big wheel in this town, no doubt about it. He's good at getting resources from the Capital, and he gives a lot of thought to keeping us protected from monsters. If it weren't for him, the village would've been wiped out a long, long time ago—though I think that would've been for the best."

Perhaps realizing the harshness of her words, Lina cast her eyes down. The mayor was her adopted father, after all.

"Even he couldn't prove we're not connected to these attacks. You see, there hasn't been anyone around us during past incidents."

That fact, along with the list the mayor had handed him a night earlier, had been duly filed in D's memory.

Mr. Meyer was single and living on his own, Cuore of course lived alone in an otherwise deserted house in town, and Lina was in the habit of holing up in her room just after sundown.

All strong-arm tactics by the mayor aside, the real reason the trio had been unharmed thus far was that nearly a decade had passed since their disappearance.

"You've climbed the hill before. Has anything else out of the ordinary happened?" D asked as he held his right hand up by his face.

As she wondered at this curious gesture, this apparent testing of the wind flow, Lina shook her head. It was an honest response.

D gave a nod and muttered, "Over here, I'd say." It was unclear whether the nod was related to Lina's response or not.

They angled swiftly through the darkness. An elaborately carved door appeared before the pair soon enough. While she knew of its existence, Lina had never been beyond it. She wasn't quite to the age where curiosity could get the better of her fear.

Though the girl was prepared to be told once more to go home, D promptly pushed his way through the doorway and melted into an even greater darkness. Following frantically, Lina was amazed when she brushed past the door. It was a four-inch-thick slab of a renowned supersteel alloy. Twenty strapping men would probably have a hard time budging it. For the first time, Lina sensed what an uncanny individual the youth who'd gone before her into the darkness was.

She took a step forward, even as the terror of being swallowed

by the blackness of an unimaginable world sank ice into the nape of her neck.

The woods brimmed with life. Light subdued the aura given off by the leaf-bare trees, spreading from Bess Fern's lungs to her whole body and adding a cheery spring to her step.

Leaving the path, she found that the air had abruptly assumed a certain dampness. Though it was still winter, this corner of the woods was strangely warm. On the trunks of trees clung mosses and fungi in every shade from blue, green, and purple down to tones that were patently nauseating.

Bess made her way in, taking care not to slip, and at last she dropped to her knees at the roots of a colossal trunk.

Word from the sheriff's office that no one should be out wandering around alone for the next day or two hadn't reached her house until after she'd left.

A smile spread across her plump, boyish face.

Just as anticipated, the edible moss that had supposedly been plucked clean three days earlier tightly packed the space between the snaking roots. She hadn't slept for fear someone might've harvested it already, but she'd been right to come check.

In the villages and hamlets of the Frontier, this moss was a valuable food substitute, used in practically any kind of cooking, from steaks to soups and jams. When sun dried, the moss was good for six months to a year. What's more, the essence of the moss could be extracted using a centrifugal separator. Wounds plastered with this salve closed up almost instantly, and its usefulness in counteracting the venom of poisonous moth men made it an indispensable item for travelers and others afield.

Bess planned on swapping the moss she harvested with the trader, due to come to the village in the first of spring, for some fashionable apparel from the Capital. The teen's eyes swam with images of herself in her new finery.

Cautiously slipping a shovel in where moss met soil, she put the green spoils in her basket in such a way as not to crumble the friable surface. After ten minutes, the basket was filled to the brim.

There was still a fair patch left. And she was pretty sure those *things* her father kept must have a sweet tooth for moss, too.

Maybe she'd take just a little bit more—but the hands she extended with that intent stopped halfway to the mark. A cloud had moved across the sun. No, it was no cloud—the inky blackness blanketing Bess was clearly the shadow of something

humanoid.

The scream she unleashed was her last act of defiance before losing her seventeen years.

Cyrus Fern immediately recognized the cry rising to echo in the treetops as his daughter's. On hearing the sheriff's broadcast, and realizing his daughter had gone out alone, he'd set out after her with a strong hunch she'd be in the mossy woods she talked about so much. His whole body quivered with anger and despair.

Calling his daughter's name as he dashed onward, he laid his hands to the lids of the fair-sized baskets he had hitched on either hip and unlatched them. The *things* inside grew ever more restless, and, from the opening of the basket on the right, a base, brutal growl escaped.

Suddenly, violet sparks shot from the mouth of the basket on the left, and Fern wasted no time in pulling his hand away. You'd think he'd be used to it, but these *things* were always tough to handle. The fingertips of the nonconductive glove he had on his left hand were scorched, and bluish smoke wafted skyward.

The instant he sprinted into the place he sought, Fern's eyes went wide with outrage.

Cradled in the arms of a figure in ash-colored cloth, Bess vapidly stared into the heavens, as twin streams of lifeblood coursed down her throat. Her skin faded to paraffin. Despair became a torrent of rage that flooded every fiber of Cyrus Fern's being. He forgot any chance of saving his daughter and he flung open the basket lids.

The ashen figure turned in his direction.

With the thud of Bess' body falling to the mossy carpet, monstrous things in Fern's baskets came to rest on the ground.

There was a pair of them, and yet they were hardly a matched pair.

Checked by their master's monumental anger, a titanic spider, whose octet of firmly planted legs were easily ten feet in length, and a cloud of scintillant purple both glowered at the ashen figure.

Anyone who knew Fern's line of work would sorely regret ever laying a hand on his daughter. Those who did a lot of traveling needed something to defend themselves against merciless bandits and Nobility-spawned demons, and more often than not it made sense to purchase a supernatural creature of like power—a guard beast. And it so happened Fern, the head of the Vigilance Committee, trained and sold them.

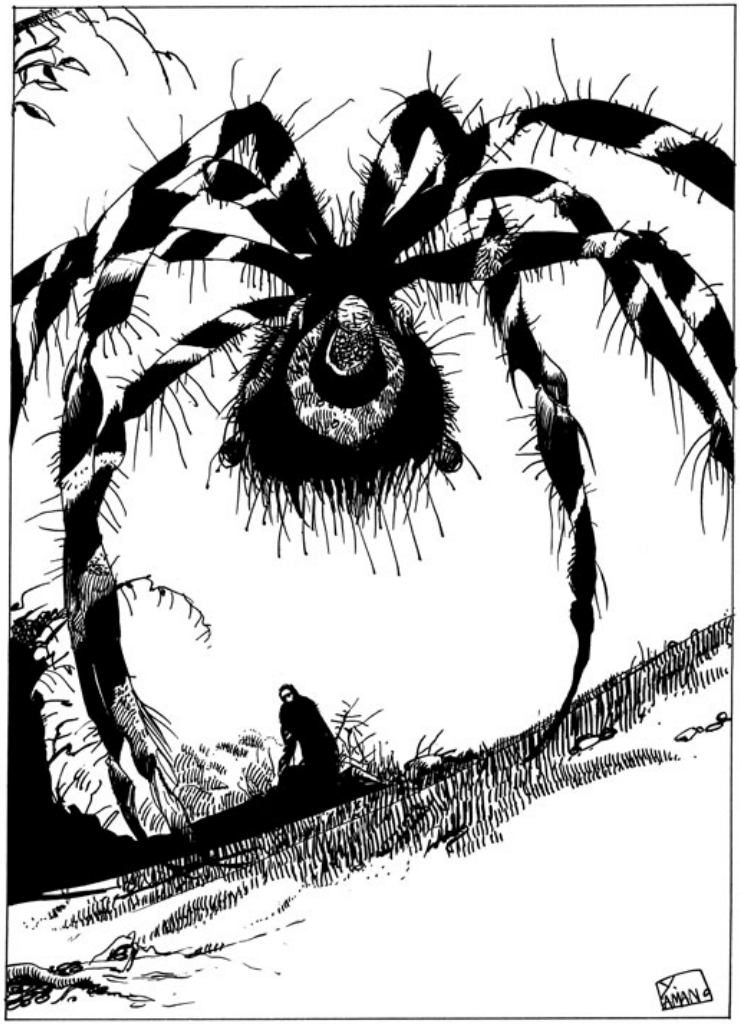
Though the guard beasts descended from the original demons and magical monstrosities propagated by the Nobility, as

generations passed, numerous mutations and new species had been born. About two thousand years earlier, some extreme rarities, able to be domesticated by the humans, appeared. As far as the beasts' training went, they were taught from birth to be strictly inactive until some sort of sonic wave or magic formula was used to trigger them—something no one else would understand.

And what monsters Fern had.

If it seemed incomprehensible that the massive arachnid had been shut up in a basket the size of a bird cage, the adjacent purple cloud presented an even stranger sight. The smoky mass boiling up from the heart of the cloud formed a perimeter more than a foot and a half wide, and, every time a light of some sort pulsed in the central portion, violet-hued sparks flew from all over the cloud.

It was one of the most bizarre forms of life on earth—an electricity beast.



Fern let fly an arcane and indecipherable cry—a harsh command to attack.

With speed belying its size, the spider advanced. The coruscating cloud rose in the air.

The ashen figure crouched just a bit.

Silver flashed, and then violet sparks fanned out like touch-me-nots, blending darkness and light in a corner of the woods.

An arachnid leg, severed at the second joint, sailed through the air.

As the figure sheared off the leg of the approaching spider with a single flourish of his longsword, he had also parried an electrical assault by the cloud with one of his sleeves.

Amazement suffused the face of ever-watchful Fern. The cloud's sparks carried more than half a million volts.

The longsword whirled, fending off the electricity beast's next two attacks and driving for the beast's body. The figure's sleeve was ablaze.

The sword tip came to an abrupt halt.

Though the shadowy figure put all his strength behind it, the blade didn't quiver in the least, as if it was imbedded in solid stone.

Abandoning his weapon, the figure bounded from the ground in a great leap. Above its head, something like flimsy white threads drifted down to earth, fixing the figure in midair.

Just above the figure's wildly craning head was the supposedly earthbound spider. But in light of how the thread was expelled from between the massive mandibles rather than from the abdomen, it seemed likely that the monster was actually a mutant that merely resembled a spider. By a single thread—thinner than a true spider's and of fiercely adhesive mucus—the pseudo-arachnid hung itself from a huge branch on an equally cyclopean trunk. The strength of that silken line was evident; the spider easily dangled the massive form of the figure beneath it, steadily drawing its prey up toward its fearsome giant mandibles.

Perhaps the shadowy figure had already given up, for his motionless body was struck by a number of violet lightning bolts and flames. Black smoke rose from the outline of the form.

"Take that, you freaky son of a bitch. Piece of shit born-again bloodsucker. Either them blasts will burn you to a crisp or my spider'll crush the life out of you with his big old pincers." A hatred-filled laugh echoed up from Fern. "But before they do, I'll have me a look at your face, you little bastard. Who the hell are you? Cuore? Lina? That schoolmarm Meyer? Or are you—"

Another thread fastened itself to the mask hiding the features

of the shadowy figure and deftly stripped it off.

"But you're—?!"

What was it that made his cry of shock die half-uttered? Was it the sight of the burning vermilion shafts of light blazing from the middle of that bared face? Perhaps it was caused by the gentle laying of hands as cold as ice to both his shoulders.

"Oh, Papa . . . "

The lilting words of his daughter crept across the nape of his neck just ahead of her fangs.

From the cover of a titanic tree a short distance away, someone saw the denouement. Having slipped out of bed, Cuore stood with his normally leaden eyes gleaming in his wasted, haggard face, straining with all his might to suppress a scream.

When her eyes became accustomed to the dark, Lina found that she and D were descending a wide passageway. The walls and ceiling were stonework, though the corridor was strangely bereft of the usual sense of crushing claustrophobia felt in tight tunnels. To the contrary, Lina got the feeling there were great, spacious chambers just beyond the walls they passed.

At various points on the walls and ceiling, the gleams of what seemed to be intruder sensors and radiation-containing devices could be seen.

"You know, it's pretty hard to believe there are still underground chambers so big. We must be, like, a hundred yards underground by now," Lina said in disgust to D, who walked a few paces ahead. They had been walking for about a half an hour, and she was no longer amused by the adventure.

"We haven't even gone down ten."

"You've got to be joking!"

"You can relax. We'll reach the end of the line in a minute."

Just as he said, less than sixty seconds later the pair came to a shutter made out of what seemed to be steel.

D pointed the pendant from his chest at the computerized identification device.

The shutter vanished instantly and the pair went in.

Silence like the blue embrace of dusk awaited them.

Lina's jaw dropped.

It looked like an enormous laboratory, but there could never be another place of research to match this.

Like the corridor, the walls were stonework, boulder-fashioned ramparts rising to a height of thirty feet. The desks, laid in rows across the floor, were made of sturdy hardwood and adorned with flasks, beakers, and vials of unsettling colored liquids—it looked for all the world like the lab of a medieval alchemist. Here and there, ghastly things appropriate to such a place jutted up, mixing with the bluish light to create a mood that beggared description. But positioned perfectly among that old-fashioned apparatus was what could only be a positron brain, an electro-analyzer, a matter-converter—the very embodiment of superscientific technology. Here was a perfect example of the ambivalence that epitomized the world of the Nobility.

"I can't believe this place is still intact," Lina said, scanning the surroundings. "Looks like it was some sort of research center, doesn't it? Can you tell what they were working on, D?"

Receiving no answer, she looked back over to D, who stood before a bench, intently scrutinizing the flasks and bizarre globes that were heaped atop it. He stepped up to a nearby control panel and his hands began to glide across the myriad keys.

"Don't tell me you do computers, too . . . "

Before Lina had finished saying the words, the air began to hum, and all about the room machines began springing to life.

The strangest imaginable designs, unintelligible symbols, and numerical expressions—none in the least bit familiar to Lina—shot in a riotous race across the computer's screen. D stared at the screen for no more than a second or two before he quickly toggled off the switch and started across the spacious chamber without so much as glancing at the girl.

"Hey, wait for me. You're being such a jerk. Can't very well leave your assistant behind, can you?!"

But, just as she was about to scamper after him, her foot slipped and, squealing and clutching a rack of half-filled beakers, she tumbled to the floor with an impressive noise and no small amount of breakage.

"That hurt . . . "

Luckily, she hadn't bashed her head open, but, as she kneaded her sharply throbbing backside, she glared at the unavoidably returning D with the deepest loathing.

Her eyes suddenly narrowed.

There. Where the tendril-like splashes of liquid intermingled, wasn't a wall of mysterious color forming? Wasn't it rising from the floor in what was neither fog nor smoke? Yes, and it seemed that something was wriggling within the vapor. Struggling. As if bitter and cursing.

As something round and fat suddenly slashed out of the smoke and caught hold of her ankle, Lina screamed.

Crisscrossed with dark red tendons and blood vessels, drenched in some unknown slime, it was the gigantic arm of a baby. But it had only three fingers.

Lina tore herself loose with wild abandon, and the fingers vainly clutched at the air before curling powerlessly on the floor.

As she watched in a daze as the arm liquefied to a goo, D caught hold of her and effortlessly hoisted her to her feet.

"That's a homunculus," he said. "An artificial life-form spawned by lightning and congealed ether."

"Yeah? Well, what's one doing here? What the hell was this place?"

"Better come with me. If that's all it takes to scare you, you really should go home, but I suppose it's too late for that."

"You seriously think there's any chance of getting me to go home?"

Unruffled, D scanned the laboratory. Without warning he said, "I hear there was another kid lost with you who didn't come back. Do you recall if anything happened to you here?"

"No. And I've tried to remember hundreds of times before. I've tried, Mr. Meyer's tried, even Cuore has."

"Even Cuore?"

Lina looked up at D. He stood a head taller than she did. Her expression was so disturbed, it made one wonder where it could've lurked so long in this young woman.

"Right after we got back, you see, they took us away from our parents and put us in an asylum. For a full week the sheriff and Vigilance Committee examined us. When they realized the drugs and hypnotism weren't working, they stripped us naked and stuck us with needles. See, that's a method of finding Nobles unique to our very own village. They put silver needles in your nipples and backside and depending on how the blood comes out they divine whether you're one of the Nobility or not."

D said nothing.

"In the case of a girl, ordinarily the wife of someone on the vigilance committee will do it, but no one but men examined me. They were taking turns, trading off—when they stuck me they'd change people. Old Man Gaston from the mill was there, and the boys from the slaughterhouse, and the mayor. I suppose he must've taken me in to make amends for that."

Suddenly Lina smiled brightly and took aim at D's face with her forefinger.

"Goodness, don't make such a puss. I'm the kind to forgive and

forget, after all. When I look at your face, I don't think back on old grudges. So why don't you try smiling for a change?"

"I was born like this."

"Wow! That's the first time you've said anything about yourself." She giggled. "Do you feel sympathy for me? That's not like you at all."

"Don't trouble yourself about it."

When D said this, the bluish light filling the room was extinguished abruptly.

Without even time to think that somebody had done that on purpose, Lina was grabbed from behind with great force and dragged toward the wall.

"D!"

Something like a strangely sticky, cold palm stopped her shout-widened mouth, but the instant she saw a silvery flash race through her field of vision, a *thunk* like the sound of bone being severed resounded and she was set free.

A wail arose that made her want to slap her hands over her ears, and every time D's longsword sheared through the air there was the sound of something being cleaved and falling to the ground—a sound that was to be heard over and over again.

At last it dawned on Lina that she was encircled by unknown creatures.

A dusky conjecture choked her heart. What she'd just felt touching her was beyond doubt a human hand. And that would mean, it had to be—Tajeel. But there was certainly more than one of them out there in the dark.

Dreamily, Lina sifted her memory for some recollection of Tajeel as he had been in his boyhood. She remembered the look of his swarthy face trying to appear sullen, as he handed her flower necklaces he crafted more skillfully than she could, though he still griped about how boring it was picking flowers. And it was Tajeel who had come running with nails in one hand and an arc welder in the other when the roof of her house blew off in a gale, then worked half the day to fix it. It was only natural that the thought of him doing these things out of love for her made her hold both pride and conceit in her little seven-year-old heart. More than even his own parents, it was Lina who had grieved over the loss of him.

"Stop it, D! Stop it!"

As if waiting for just that shout, a blue light threw Lina's shadow onto the stone floor.

A few paces ahead, D was putting his longsword away. In place of the grotesque figures she expected to see, there was a

profusion of deep red fluid spread across the stones of the floor. Blood. When she strained her eyes, a number of the thin, red streams ran to a rock wall to one side of the chamber. Instinctively racing closer, she asked, “What is it, D? You must’ve got a good look at it.”

D didn’t answer, but as he locked his gaze on the rock wall in question he muttered, “Strange, it wasn’t alone.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“The answers lie behind the stones of that wall. We could press forward, but now that we know something’s down here, I’d say for today our best bet is to go home. When *these things* get a hand chopped off they leave, carrying everything but the blood.”

“But what the blazes—it couldn’t be Tajeel . . . ”

She received no reply, but, looking askance at D as he turned his ever-frosty form toward the shutter, Lina was struck by a deep emotion more puzzling than dread. She continued to keep her eye on the rocky wall.

Without so much as exchanging a word, the pair made their way back down to the base of the hill.

The Hunter’s beautiful profile betrayed not a hint of a tremble at the eerie monstrosities they’d so recently encountered. Lina stole glimpses of D’s face, terrified by his implacable silence.

There were a million things she wanted to ask him: the reason why it had been so easy to find the subterranean laboratory; what he had noticed there; what those monsters really were; where Tajeel was; and, more than anything, what had been done to her and the others down there a decade ago.

As she gazed at the young Vampire Hunter’s profile—one some might call melancholy—her curiosity about all those things dwindled away and something warm covered her heart.

Was she really tagging along with D in an attempt to shed some light on the shadows of a decade earlier? She had her doubts.

“I’m going to take a ride around the village,” D said suddenly. Lina noticed they were standing by her wagon. Not far away, D’s horse was nibbling the grass, paying them no heed.

“Well then, I’ll go with you . . . ” Lina said reflexively, but disappointment slapped her heart.

“We part company here. And in the future, I’ll thank you not to interfere with my work.”

Neither his expression nor his tone differed in the least from the usual, but Lina felt the biting cold like a sudden frost. Out of

habit, she started to refute him, only to have her voice vanish down her throat.

"Go to school or head home, but don't make any stops along the way. And don't let your guard down even with those you know," D said from astride his mount.

Yeah, right. Meanie. What do you care how anyone else feels?

Suddenly trying to look sullen, her cheeks stiffened. She tried to say something back, but no words came. Making matters worse, the corners of her eyes grew hot. No, she couldn't start bawling this early in the day.

At this point the air abruptly grew tense. It was due to the lurid aura D emanated. She could feel every inch of her skin rising in gooseflesh.

The sensation was so eerie Lina couldn't even ask what was the matter, but could only turn her face in the direction D was now gazing.

A lone cyborg horse was coming down the trail from town. With its familiar chestnut hue and type ten energy tank slung from its abdomen, Lina saw it was the sheriff's mount. Coming on at a full gallop, horse and rider came to a halt with a small shower of earthen clods.

"Thought I'd find you here. You'd better come with me." The sheriff's face and voice were tinged with impatience.

"How did you know where we were?" D asked softly.

"A farmer saw Lina's wagon headed for the hill. Cuore's run off."

"I thought someone had been put in charge of watching him."

"One of the guys from the Vigilance Committee dozed off while the kid was still asleep. Can't help that. We're only flesh and blood."

"Maybe if you tell that to the next Noble to attack you they'll just make their apologies and be on their merry way."

The sheriff didn't respond to the Hunter's bitter sarcasm.

"Where did he go?" D asked.

"Don't know. But I'm afraid if we don't find him fast we'll have a lynching on our hands. See, since Cuore was at the scene last night, the whole Vigilance Committee's got the idea that he's not the culprit but he's still in cahoots with it. We've been keeping an eye on where Cuore lives, but it looks like he hasn't been back there. Which would leave the forests. I'll check in the north woods. I want you to take the south."

Without giving a reply, D wheeled his mount around. All he knew of the local geography he'd learned in a single glance at a map the mayor had given him a day earlier.

"Hurry on home," he said to the motionless Lina, just as he was about to gallop off. "You've got a date with the Capital."

By the time the girl had raised her face in consternation, D was racing like a scythe through the wind.

The sheriff hastened after him.

As he gave pursuit, the lawman watched with disbelieving eyes. Despite his own speed, the gap between them rapidly grew. It wasn't on account of D's horse. Due to his line of work, one of the first things the sheriff noticed about any outsider was their mount. He'd found that if he had some idea what sort of beast everyone was riding, it made it that much easier to come up with some strategy in the event he had to chase them down. D's horse was just the standard, run-of-the-mill type that could be picked up in any village. Even tuned up, it shouldn't be able to match the sheriff's custom grade steed, two miles per hour faster and twenty percent more durable than the average. It shouldn't have, but it did.

What the blazes . . . Does this guy use magic or something? I thought I heard something about him being a dhampir . . .

Finally, some idea of the uncanny power of the Vampire Hunter—abilities he had only heard rumors of—began to seep into the lawman's understanding.

Pulling far ahead of the sheriff, D entered the south woods. Halting his horse, he shut his eyes. A moment later, he pointed his mount at a grove of trees to his right. Had he heard the words of the wind, or caught some presence tingeing the air?

Before another minute had passed, he met some vigilantes with odd expressions running deeper into the forest.

"Watch it!" cried one.

"Whoa there!" shouted another.

The flinching, scattering men watched D's rein-handling as he sharply halted his hitherto galloping steed.

"Where's Cuore?" At the sound of the Hunter's voice, which could rightly be called soft, nearly a dozen roughnecks froze as if stitched in place. D trained his gaze on the man heading the pack, their apparent leader—the one who had been at the site of the disturbance the night before.

"He…uh, he's alright. We ain't done nothing. Yeah, we was gonna knock him around a little bit I suppose, but when we found him Mr. Fern come by."

"Fern? Was he out looking for Cuore, too?"

The man shook his head with uncomfortable haste.

They'd set out on a search for Cuore that Fern had no part in, and had found the former standing stupefied in the middle of the

forest. Determined to make him spill his guts, they'd surrounded him and were just starting in on their threats when Fern showed up. A brute of a man who ordinarily would've been the first one in line to lay into Cuore with a whip, Fern had been like a changed man, sticking up for Cuore and leading him away to stay at his own house. Or so this man said. That certainly helped account for the bewilderment gracing the faces of the men.

"Did Fern have anyone else with him?"

"Nope."

"How long ago did they leave? And where did you find Cuore?"

The man pointed back behind them.

"Go straight and you'll know it when you get there. The spot's got moss all over the place and there should be plenty of footprints. It couldn't have been ten minutes ago."

The ring of iron horseshoes mixed with the man's words.

D first headed in the direction of Fern's home. In less than five minutes his eyes lighted on a structure which looked like split logs set in the ground—the guard beast kennel. A wooden palisade rimmed the perimeter, and a pair of people—Cuore and Fern—stood before the oddly shaped gate.

"What's your business?" Fern asked, even as his expression registered surprise at D's sudden stop.

"What did you go into the woods for?" asked D from the back of his horse.

Fern grinned devilishly and put his hands to the baskets at either hip. "I take it you don't know what line I'm in. Fact is, I went out to get some of the moss and bugs I feed my guard beasts. I don't know what you're trying to get at asking a question like that, but I've two of them right here. You wanna see if I'm telling the truth or not?"

Just then, Fern got the impression that an instantaneous white light flashed between him and D. Fern blinked his eyes.

D ignored the provocation. "I want the boy back."

"Oh, you sure have a funny way of putting things. Here you are talking to me like I'm some sort of sneak-thief. Well, he's a lot better off here at my house than with some half-assed attempt at a Hunter from who-the-blazes-knows-where. There's a woman's touch here, and I don't think it would hurt him none to learn how civilized folks live."

"Suddenly overcome with love for your fellow man?" D inquired, an eldritch aura condensing about him. In a low tone trenchant as the finest blade he asked, "What happened in the forest?"

Fern was silent. His face was solemn, brimming with murderous intent, and his bony fingers crept to the lids of the baskets. D didn't move. But one had to wonder how he hoped to fend off a pair of beasts from atop his mount, restricted as his movements would be.

A large figure suddenly interrupted the ghastly flow of bloodlust between the men.

Cuore stood before D, blocking his way. Eyes pleading, he shook his head and pointed to the gate. Was he trying to say he wanted him to go?

Shortly thereafter, D wheeled his horse about.

"Heading home already? Next time you show up here, you'd better have that pig-sticker of yours drawn. See, I've got all kinds of 'goods' here of the scary-bad kind. Like these!"

Fern's confidence-stoked voice faltered. The lids hadn't come off his baskets.

The face he raised, now paled by the knowledge that tapered needles of unfinished wood skewered the lids and baskets, was pounded by the hearty laughter of hoofbeats.

Racing all the way back to the forest, D dismounted in the malice-shrouded bog. Just as the man from the Vigilance Committee said, there was a confusion of tracks. This was where they'd encountered Cuore, yes, and the place where just previous to that Fern and his daughter had met with the vampire's baleful fangs.

It is debatable whether this youth, too, was apprehensive of the unpleasant heat, but D set foot into the kaleidoscopic world without so much as a knitted brow.

From D's lightly clasped left hand a malicious, drifting voice suggested, "Things are starting to get interesting."

"How so?"

"That Fern character—there's something funny about the way he's acting. Then there's the kid, who must be seriously wet behind the ears. Why on earth would he *want* to go with that guy? Ol' basket-pants is in charge of the guys who beat the stuffing out of him, ain't he? So what's the story? You seem like you're on to something already."

"That boy wanted to go with him more than anything." A rare teasing tone had entered D's voice. "Try to read my mind about the rest. Which reminds me—if you've got your strength back, I need your help with something."

"Still far from recovered. Can't you spare me another two or three days to recuperate at my own pace? When the time comes,

I'll have a hell of an interesting tale for your ears."

"I can hardly wait." Halting his stride, D terminated the conversation. Strangely, it was at just the spot where the ashen figure had attacked Fern's daughter.

D looked to the ground before his feet.

A multicolored carpet already concealed all signs of the struggle. The growth rate of these fungi was remarkably swift.

His intently scanning eyes gradually gave off a red brilliance. The miasma around him eddied suspiciously, and his gorgeous visage became that of a vampire.

His vermilion gaze halted on a certain piece of ground. Drawing a translucent cylinder the size of his little finger from a pouch on his belt, D knelt on the ground.

What could he be searching for that would necessitate becoming a vampire? Putting what appeared to be a piece of ground into the tube, D slowly surveyed his surroundings. As if beckoned by that ominous gaze, a black cloud surged from the distant sky.

NIGHTMARES ON A RAINY NIGHT

CHAPTER 4

As the last period was finishing, droplets began to hammer the window panes, and, by the time the teacher left school, it had really started coming down. The sound of rain rebounding off his hooded slicker was nearly deafening.

Put just a mite too much grease on this one, Mr. Meyer ruminated as he walked the muddy path. The thicker the were-tiger fat they treated the heavy moose hides with, the faster it dried, and, in the fierce squalls particular to the region, the stiffened coat made a sound like cheeks being slapped.

Not five minutes after passing through the school's front gate, the noise became all the more intense, and the teacher began to regret his haste to return home. He couldn't see fifteen feet in front of him.

Be that as it may, to villagers menaced by the bloodsucking Nobility, rain was one of the most welcome sounds. As one would expect from legends of vampires' inability to cross running water, statistically speaking the incidence of attack on rainy days was, for all purposes, nil. Though they might be grimacing, these Frontier people were gleeful as they hustled homeward.

"What on earth . . . ?" Spying a shape moving with inhuman speed through the sheets of falling droplets, the teacher came to a stop. It definitely looked very much like a man, but its bizarre gait, somehow different from that of an ordinary person, cast a foreboding pall over his heart.

All the water demons and vicious river sprites that loved to come out on rainy days had been exterminated years ago, and the talismans mounted at strategic points around the village should have kept the area safe from more of their kind until the end of time. But if that was true, what could the figure be . . . ?

Recalling that there was a lone farm off in the direction the figure had vanished, Mr. Meyer turned back toward the school. He hoped to get help. But it wasn't much more than a quarter mile to the farmhouse. More than enough distance for the fear in his heart to become reality.

Hesitating momentarily, Mr. Meyer went after the shadowy figure.

A narrow footpath ran between fields planted with gargantuan

produce. The soft topsoil was gouged by the driving rain, sending up an uninterrupted spray of yellow. Here and there, the sharp crack of vegetable leaves snapping from their respective stems could be heard.

The figure had long since left his range of vision. Without a doubt, it was headed for the farmhouse. Mr. Meyer picked up the pace.

His fears had been well founded.

When the silhouette of the farmhouse floated into the rain-soaked world, a scream split through the roar of the rain. There was the sound of something breaking, then it was lost beneath a bellow that couldn't be attributed to man or beast.

The teacher sprinted, stripping off his coat. He fished in his blazer pocket as he ran, and clumsily pulled out a buckshot-firing tube intended for self-defense.

He stood rooted before the farmhouse door. The door itself was undisturbed, but in the mud wall beside it a huge hole gaped like a blackened maw. It was large enough for a full-grown man to pass through with ease. The teacher's legs turned weak at the thought of the brute strength needed to make that hole.

Another scream. This time it was a child's voice. Fear was banished in an instant by a powerful sense of professional duty, and Mr. Meyer flew in through the entrance. The teacher couldn't have imagined the scene he would glimpse in that first heartbeat, a sight that replaced his sense of mission with a kind of numbness.

His field of vision was filled by a broad room and the body of a woman prone on its dirt floor. On top of the Rubenesque form of what was apparently the farmer's wife squirmed a *thing* with disheveled locks. The thing, whatever it was, was roughly the size of a child seven or eight years old.

An ample breast spilled from the woman's shredded clothing, and across the breast crept a scarlet tongue. There was the sound of licking, but it wasn't the sort of sound that came from the loving play men and women engaged in. The thing was lapping at the redness that coursed down the woman's bosom, running from the base of her throat.

The ebony head moved over the woman's breast and her body twitched. It raised its visage gingerly to face the teacher. Weirdly jutting cheeks it had, and sunken eyes. Not a sliver of humanity was to be found in its bloodshot orbs, and its lips, uncommon only in their size, warped in an evil smirk at the appearance of fresh prey. With a wet thud, it spat something out on the earthen floor.

One didn't need to see the thing's bloodstained teeth to know that what it spat was the well-gnawed tip of a breast.

The side door creaked open. In Mr. Meyer's eyes, what came out of the back room looked like a werewolf with the body of a child in its jaws.

He still had the buckshot tube in his hands, but he didn't bring it to bear on either of the creatures. Not only was he a teacher, but he was a Frontier person as well. Demons and monstrosities dwelt all around them, and he knew ways to deal with them. On two previous occasions he had fended off attacks with the weapon in his hands—by a harpy in one case and a man-serpent another time. But this time he didn't move.

Realizing where his mind was starting to lead him, the teacher trembled violently.

The one that had been gnawing at the woman's corpse rose, while the creature crawling about on all fours dropped the child's body. The monsters closed in . . .

"Hold it. Don't come near me." The words barely escaped his throat. Side to side the buckshot tube wavered without fixing on a target.

Two creatures, the teacher tried to impress upon himself. *Two things. Not people.*

Eyes crazed solely with murder burned like flames, and blood-smeared lips hauled back to expose rows of teeth. Teeth that were average and human.

These things are just like me, the teacher mused.

From the front and flank dark shapes pounced.

Stop it!

A deafening report and thirty balls of shot stifled the teacher's cry.

Outside, the squall grew stronger.

While that small but fearsome battle was taking place at one end of the village, Lina was already back at her home. After what had happened in the ruins it was no surprise she couldn't focus in class, but the cause of her singular depression was what D had said.

Don't follow me around anymore—that's what she'd been told. In light of how she had fancied herself the young Vampire Hunter's assistant, D's order was a grievous wound to her pride.

Can't allow myself to fly off the handle. Gotta get him to take that back.

Keeping these two sentiments in mind, Lina dropped her book bag in her room, then burst into D's abode—the barn. D's horse was tied up in one of the stalls. *Goody*, she thought. *He's in*.

"Now I've seen everything," she exclaimed, her amazement at this unforeseen tableau forming the words of its own accord.

She had heard from the mayor that D was a dhampir. And she had some knowledge about their nature. Though she had been certain that he would either be sleeping or feeding, D had in fact found a wooden desk and chair that had been moved out to the barn years ago. He was at them now, shaking what looked like a little flask.

Approaching dumbstruck, Lina saw the instruments laid out on the desktop. Her eyes went wide again, and this time wider than before. Not only were there a number of silvery cylinders and medicine bottles filled with draughts of unsettling shades, there was also a rack of flasks with pale vapors rising from the flasks' openings. Unless her eyes deceived her, besides the rack a microcomputer hummed dully and gave off flashes of cyanic light. "Wow! Can all Vampire Hunters do chemical analysis?"

Though he'd probably long since noticed his visitor, D made no move to face her. But there wasn't necessarily any enmity in that.

"Hey," she called out, firming her shoulders for a struggle.

"I thought I'd dismissed my assistant."

"Yippee!" Lina snapped her fingers. A smile spilled from her.

"What are you so happy about?"

"It looks like I get to be your assistant again. Oh, now don't try and talk your way out of it. I see some hope for me yet in the way you phrased that. See, I'm a mind reader, too. I know full well where your mind's headed."

Really just yours and no one else's, Lina thought.

D turned to Lina and said, "If I say it some other way will you get out?"

Her body trembling with chill at something carried in that soft tone, Lina shook her head as gaily as possible. "Not on your vampire-hunting life."

She wondered what she'd do if her words offended him, but D returned to his desk expressionless.

She wasted no time going over to him. Shifting her eyes to the computer, she said, "An estimated 14.3 grams per 100 cubic centimeters, 4.5 million in a cubic millimeter—that's the amount of hemoglobin and blood count for a woman you've got displayed there. Has someone else been attacked?!"

D turned to her and said, "Good call." He wasn't referring to

the disturbing incident, but rather to her take on the numerical data displayed on his computer.

"What do you expect from a prodigy?" Lina chuckled, puffing her already ample chest. A second later, she slipped her cheek in by D's face. "Your assistant would like to know something, Boss. Whose blood is this?"

D met the mischievous girl's look with his sparkling eyes, then turned the other way.

Humph, that was an unexpected move. Does he think I'll call it quits so easily? "Fine," said Lina. "Don't tell me. I guess I'll just have to tag along and do my own thing. Wherever you go, I'll be there on my own little agenda. So try not to get bent out of shape when I trample all over your precious evidence."

"Do what you like." End of discussion.

Of course, throwing a sulking fit wouldn't sway D. And it would be galling to go now with things the way they stood. Lina wound up hovering over the computer.

Once, several years back, she'd seen a computer that a traveling merchant had brought to town. A legacy of the Nobility's vanished scientific culture, computers were few in number, and rarer still were people who could use them. Clearly this must be one of the most powerful models, with a built-in ability to draw inferences in addition to the usual data-analyzing functions. Still, it was hard to believe a Vampire Hunter was used to using such a device.

D's fingers gently brushed the magnetic ball and the display changed.

"That's 16 grams of hemoglobin, blood count of 5 million—that one's a man's. D, you don't suppose—"

"There were drops of the woman's blood in the middle of the woods where Cuore was found. Thanks to the high humidity, it hadn't dried completely. It still had its scent, too. I've added some blood from the woman last night to it."

Just as Lina was about to jump for joy at finally receiving a civil reply, the computer began to display something other than numerical data. Top and bottom, left and right, the pale spark dragged its tail.

"Oh, I get it. From saliva mixed with the blood of its victim you can deduce who the Noble really is. Sensational!" Lina trained a gaze of fear and curiosity on the display.

Where the randomly flowing flashes made contact, a cluster of luminous points formed and shifted locations in a manner that was momentarily dizzying. In no time, a single face had been rendered on the dark-green display.

Lina swallowed her spittle.

"Recognize this?" D inquired.

Lina shook her head. The screen was filled with a three-dimensional image of a man she'd never seen. D's hand moved and the perspective of the "face" changed several times, but Lina couldn't recall seeing it. "It's no one from the village. Not Tajeel, either. That's a relief . . . "

That seemed to dispel some of her doubts. The sound of falling rain came clearly to her ears.

"Why are you crying?" D asked, switching off the computer. The sample of blood he'd collected in the forest had since dried, making it impossible now to deduce the identity of the woman who had been bitten there.

"Hmph," Lina snorted, turning the other way and dabbing at her eyes. "Rainy days are supposed to make you sentimental, you know. What kind of girl would I be if they didn't?"

She hoped D would pick up the conversation, but instead he looked out of the entrance, commenting on how it was really pouring down.

"Why is it the Nobility have problems with the rain?" Lina had wondered about this for years. When she was little, it seemed any time there were rumors of Nobles appearing in some distant village she'd only been allowed outdoors on rainy days.

As he replied, "I don't know, either," D's face became mysteriously pale. He was questioning why he bothered answering each and every question the girl posed. "From a biological standpoint, a number of mysteries remain about how their metabolisms work. The question of why they can only move by night, or how their bodies can heal wounds from bullets, or why they can be destroyed with a single wooden stake. The same can be said for their inability to cross running water, or the way rainy days prevent them from venturing outdoors. It's rather ironic that so many defects remain when they've attained what's believed to be the pinnacle of biological evolution—true immortality."

"Looks like the all-revealing light of science isn't perfect after all," said Lina, eyes alight with inquisitiveness. "I wonder if the Nobility themselves ever solved those mysteries."

"So far as I know?" D shook his head. "Biological weaknesses are linked to some defect of the species. If they had seized on some clue, some explanation, I doubt the day when men ruled the earth would have ever come. The Nobles vanished from history without even knowing why they were doomed. All told, I suppose they were rather good sports about it."

"A fundamental defect of the species," Lina muttered, deeply

moved by what D had said. “The Nobility died off, while mankind remained. But even now we’re terrified of some vision of those who’ve gone. Doesn’t that seem sort of pitiful for the supposed rulers of the earth?”

D kept his silence as he moved to the entrance, then put his hand out into the cascade pouring down from the eaves. As he did so, his eyes fixed on a spot outside. Lina tilted her head in consternation and followed after him.

Beyond the blurring gray membrane they could see the profile of the hill and a number of human silhouettes. People swinging hoes up and down. They could hear the whine of atomic tractors, too. If you didn’t mind getting a little wet, this was the finest weather one could ask for to put in some extra hours in the fields without the threat of the dreaded Nobility.

“If I were to go out now, my body temperature would drop nearly four degrees,” D said, watching the droplets smashing against his outstretched hand. “My running speed would fall by thirty percent, you see, as my whole metabolism slowed down. On the other hand, your kind . . . ”

Reading the faraway look in D’s eye, Lina felt pained by the destiny the gorgeous youth bore. What was it like to spring from Noble and mortal blood? When stalking one of the two, what went through his heart?

Lina took D’s soaked arm.

“What the . . . ?”

Clasping everything from the wrist up with both hands, she pressed it to her cheek without saying a word. *His hand’s so cold, but maybe I can warm it up just a bit. Maybe it’ll make me his temperature*. Lina shut her eyes and heard only the sound of the rain.

Suddenly the eeriest sensation struck her countenance. Goosebumps rising all over her body, Lina let go of his hand. D’s gaze hadn’t moved in the least; his profile still pointed in the same direction. But what stood before the girl wasn’t the same young man, gorgeous, solitary, and proud.

“Don’t leave this spot.” His parting words vested with an authority that made them impossible to disobey, the Vampire Hunter stalked out into the falling droplets. It took a minute before Lina realized he also carried his longsword in his left hand.

D’s speed didn’t appear to have dropped the least bit below normal. A hundred yards took him less than six seconds. He didn’t even close his eyelids against the wind-whipped rain lashing his face.

Easily clearing the fence, he entered a field. This didn’t cause

even the slightest delay. Not even the mire would think of catching the youth's feet or making him slip.

He arrived at his destination some fifty yards distant in another three seconds flat.

The farmers had formed a ring, but they whirled about as the ghastly aura struck them. Their faces were fearful as they cleared a path.

D planted his knee by the side of the *thing* lying on the ground.

The creature had a diminutive body and was crowned with a head of lengthy hair. Its flesh was as pale and blue as a drowning victim, but something red leaked from it. Apparently there was still some life in it.

D had no difficulty flipping the body over. A murmur ran through the assembled farmers. The chest and flank of the creature bore a number of entry wounds. Probably left by buckshot, judging from the spread.

"Which way did it come?" D asked without turning.

"Over yonder . . . from the direction of the school," a tremulous voice answered.

"Relax. It won't be moving anymore," D said, pointing at the creature. "Carry it back to the mayor's barn. Or if you don't feel like touching it, summon the sheriff."

"You . . . you do it. Ain't that your job?" someone on the other side of the group protested. "If we touch that there abomination, our hands will rot and drop off. Hell, I say one monster should clean up after another." The boldly blurted words became a shriek and the farmer dropped on the spot. Nothing had happened, aside from D standing up again. But as the wind and rain unexpectedly grew wilder, the men saw something blazing with a brilliant red light.

D's eyes.

"I said carry it." His tone hadn't changed at all—if anything, it was calmer—but the men seemed to sense something in it and they jostled to be the first to the corpse of the creature. Without sparing them another glance, D returned to the barn with the same speed he'd come.

Lina and the mayor stood in the doorway.

"What the blazes is going on?" the old man asked. His wrinkle-rimmed eyes had a glint approaching madness.

Replying simply, "I don't know," D swiftly moved inside and made the necessary preparations. He donned his coat and traveler's hat. Around him and only him the flow of time seemed different. From where the mayor and Lina stood, the clothing seemed to move to D's body as if magnetically attracted. Less than

ten seconds after returning, D passed the pair again on his way back out.

A considerable while after the thunder of shod hooves faded into the far reaches of the rain, the farmers came into the barn carrying the remains of the thing.

Going on for a mile and a quarter, D halted his horse. Mortal eyes would have seen nothing but rain, but D could discern the black shape of the schoolhouse wavering some five hundred yards ahead.

"Lost the scent. Your turn," he said to his left hand. His palm puffed and swelled into a masculine face that needed no introduction—the ghastly countenanced carbuncle.

In a tone of undisguised displeasure it said, "Sheesh, and right in the middle of a good dream. Oh, raining, is it?" No sooner had he said this than he opened his tiny mouth to greedily gulp down a share of the torrential downpour.

"What about the scent?" D pressed him. There was a frigid anger in his voice.

"Keep your drawers on. Just because I've been asleep don't mean I haven't worked up an appetite. East of here. Four hundred yards, give or take a smidge."

It seemed both of them—D and his companion in his palm—were able to catch the bloody scent of the beast that'd disappeared in the heavy rain. In less than a minute, D was making his way through the entrance to a lone farmhouse—the same home where a mere hour earlier Mr. Meyer had encountered tragedy.

The thick stench of blood assailed his nose.

On the room's earthen floor lay the bodies of the farmer's wife and child. Confirming that both had expired, D knelt by the entrance to the room.

Lifeblood was spilled across the packed earth, and the stains crept outside like a serpent. Probably blood from the monstrosity. Just as he had in the forest, D sealed some bloodstained soil in a glass vial from a pouch on his combat utility belt, then retrieved another object with his right hand.

The buckshot cylinder. It was the one Mr. Meyer had used, but D didn't know that. Holding the muzzle to his left hand, he asked, "How about it?"

"Fired an hour ago, more or less."

"From the look of those corpses, this wasn't the work of a Noble. There were two of them. One being was the thing in the

field, I take it. So whose blood is this—the weapon's owner or whatever the owner shot?"

"Can't say. But there's no one here anymore."

D stood up again and went outside. Once more the wind and rain covered his dashing profile. "No need to involve myself with anything aside from vampires, but those things . . . " D muttered as he was about to place his foot in the stirrup. Suddenly, his body tensed.

There was nothing anywhere near him. Nothing and no one.

Despite that, D didn't move a muscle. Perhaps he couldn't move; then again, maybe he wouldn't be moved.

Somewhere behind him, neither near nor far, a certain presence had gushed into being.

D, it called. Not with a voice, but the presence itself. *I thought you'd come.*

"You were here, weren't you?" D's voice was almost mechanical. From the way he phrased it, he seemed to be acquainted with whoever the *presence* behind him belonged to. "I've been looking for you for a long time."

Most likely failed, the presence muttered gravely. *Best you come once again to the computation center. I'm always there.*

D's right hand moved. A lethal swipe mowed through the air.

Most likely failed.

Rain spattered against the naked longsword as D whirled around.

I'm in the computation center.

As if blown to the four winds by the silently speeding needle of wood, the presence was swallowed by the darkness.

D stared at the empty point in space while the rain, rebounding off every inch of his body, sounded like derisive laughter.

The mayor's home was being battered by stormy waves of the supernatural. Nobles that walked by day were more than enough to send shivers through the entire village; now a new type of monster had appeared and attacked a farm. The disappearance of another villager only added to the mayor's woes.

After hearing D's account, the sheriff and a party from the Vigilance Committee visited the scene. Based on the other corpses and the vast quantity of blood spilled on the dirt floor, the consensus was Mr. Meyer had most likely been slain. His identity had been established when a member of the Vigilance Committee verified that the buckshot cylinder D brought back belonged to

the teacher.

The corpse of the monstrosity was carted to the village physician for dissection, but the news from this hadn't been particularly bright either.

It wasn't a creature but rather a human being, though it differed from them in terms of its skeletal structure, musculature, and intestinal regions; all told, nearly two hundred distinct disparities had been noted. No incision had been made in the head, but from the shape of the skull the doctor concluded that its brain was exceedingly small. Its intelligence would be reduced proportionally. As for why the head hadn't been opened, the government stipulated that, when new forms of life were discovered, the brain was to be properly refrigerated and shipped to the Capital, skull and all.

At that point, D, who happened to be present, made a surprising request. He wanted them to loan him the corpse and viscera for the evening.

"What the blazes for?!" the mayor shouted, knitting his brow. Like the physician, he was highly skeptical.

"I'd like to examine them with my own instruments. No disrespect intended."

Perhaps the infamous eldritch aura gently brushed the nape of their necks, for the physician paled and held his tongue while the mayor nodded reluctantly. After all, he'd summoned D to their village, and, though the results so far could hardly be called favorable, after witnessing the nightmarish might of the vampire the previous night he knew in the marrow of his bones that this gorgeous youth alone could slay it, whatever it turned out to be.

"Have it your way. But just for the day. Tomorrow it goes off to the Capital. But I'm more interested in what you plan on doing with the woman."

The woman in question was Kaiser's wife, who'd been attacked by a vampire twice and now lay in bed dangling between life and death. A young man from the Vigilance Committee stood watch over her night and day with stake in hand. Her husband still hadn't returned.

"No problem there. Bring her to the barn along with the cadaver."

And so it came to be that D was going to spend the night with a pair of corpses.

With all that had happened—monstrous new creatures appearing, then encountering that presence in the downpour and seeing his lethal blow slashing through empty air—D's nerves must have been extraordinary for him not to display any tinge of

either excitement or concern.

When he got the news from the sheriff that the exhaustive search of the town had turned up nothing, D was composed, perhaps, because he hadn't expected anything from the start. And when they told him Mr. Meyer hadn't returned home, D didn't so much as raise an eyebrow.

Left alone in the barn, D stood by the bench that bore the monstrosity. By its side were a number of jars with its organs in formaldehyde, the glass glinting harshly with light from a mercury lamp on the ceiling. Both the body and the jars had been brought from the physician's home. Outside, the rain made a considerable din.

"You there?" he asked in a low voice.

"Yup," his palm responded. The face was already surfacing.

D held his left hand over the cadaver. The eviscerated abdominal cavity sagged pitifully. And, on the neatly sutured incision on the flank, the stitches of cauterizing thread on the flesh were unusually grotesque.

From the clawed tips of the thing's swollen toes the left hand crept slowly to the twisted ankles, then to the badly bowled thighs. Naturally, D had his eyes trained in that direction, too, but, as he held his hand close to the cadaver, the way the countenanced carbuncle in his palm continued to survey the unmoving patient with the gravest of expressions was more comic than spooky.

Moving his left hand over the flanks, chest, and face, then finally lightly touching the hair flowing from the crown of its head, D said, "Well?"

"Hmm, just as you expected. But at the moment it remains dead."

D nodded. What exactly did it mean by "at the moment it remains dead"?

"When will it awaken?"

"Don't ask stupid questions. From ancient times the demons have always gathered at three Morning. On another note, while I was dozing I overheard talk about some teacher named Meyer gone missing. Think this one's playmate got him?"

Apparently the countenanced carbuncle could still see and hear what went on in the outside world while deep in the palm of D's hand.

"Probably," D said. "But there's still one thing about this case I can't figure."

"Hmph," the other voice snorted derisively. "No doubt the key would be in them ruins. You could always go up there alone and

check it all out. Bringing the girlie along would be safe enough, too, I suppose. That is, so long as *you-know-who* is up there."

The chiding voice died abruptly. D had clenched his left hand in a tight fist. He did it with such strength his flawless young flesh shook, and, along with the hoarse groan of agony, a trickle of bright blood spilled from between his curled fingers.

"*Him*," D muttered, sending his gaze to the wide open doors. "It all started with him. All the dreams, and all the tragedies."

A fierce wind gusted in through the doorway, setting the ceiling lamp swaying. In that light D's face became a devilish one.

"Stop it . . . "

Fishy lips sucked up the girl's entreaty as the mayor pressed his face against hers.

When the impassioned breath and tongue invaded her ear, Lina let out an involuntary moan. Beneath her pajama top a wrinkled hand kneaded her breast.

"Please . . . just stop . . . I don't want this."

"Why is that?" Enjoying Lina's refusal, the mayor pinned her white arms against the sheets. "Because that Hunter's here?" he asked, letting a faint smile rise to his lips. "Can't say as I blame you. I'm a man, and I have to confess his looks make even my heart beat faster. Well, that's fine and dandy. Once in a while, it's nice to get a piece of tail from someone with a little fight in 'em."

His lips attached themselves to her breast. Lina twisted her body, but there was nothing she could do. Tears spilled from the corners of her eyes, dampening the white sheets.

After a bit, the old man took his lips away and said, "You're mine. It was me that saved you from becoming the village plaything, who adopted you, who kept them from doing anything against you. Soon you'll be leaving town. Afraid there's not much we can do about that. But until you do—hell, even after you're in the Capital, I won't let any other man have you. And I won't have you falling for anyone, either."

His voice was charged with obsession. Lina averted her face.

"I'll see to it you don't forget about me. I'll hammer my memory into your body. Like so."

The old man's face sank below her waist, and Lina bit her lip to keep from voicing the fruit of that torment. A bony hand crept along the exposed whiteness of her thigh.

She looked to her pillow in desperation. Under the pillow she spied a single white bloom. It pulled the passion from her frame in an unbelievable way. Thoughts of the face of someone she'd never

seen came to Lina.

Noticing a slight change in the way the girl's body was responding, the old man increased the pace of his tongue, and yet the expression Lina wore was mysteriously serene.

The face conjured in her heart of hearts bore a striking resemblance to the Vampire Hunter.

Winds joined the torrential downpour, and the level of the river continued to rise. Although the flow had been intense to begin with, it couldn't keep pace with the cresting waves whipped up by the wind. At the angry tone of the muddy tributary, now surpassing even the piercing sound of the rain, the residents along the riverbanks exchanged anxious looks.

Two figures moved at the foot of the bridge. Both were men from the Vigilance Committee. In their black raincoats, they were reminiscent of the creatures of the night they so feared.

"Looks like trouble. Could be she's gonna give way."

Hearing the opinion of the bigger man, the smaller one stood on the incline shaking his head. "Nah, it rained just as hard last year. The bridge's girders have been reinforced, and they even built up these embankments. Nothing to worry about. Of course, I don't know what'll happen if it keeps up like this for another day or two more. And how many times have I got to tell you not to grab hold of my legs like I was your own personal ladder?"

A silence fell between the pair. Actually, the bigger man was *above* the little man on the embankment.

It took a long time for the little man to summon the nerve to look down at his ankles.

The arm wrapped around them belonged to a man whose upper body jutted from the black water.

"You, you're . . . " The little man recalled the face of the Vampire Hunter who'd fallen off this very bridge, coffin and all, not so many days earlier. Pale face expressionless, the Hunter drew a stake from his belt and drove it through the little man's heart. Death spasms wracked his short frame. Lifeless, he tumbled into the water and was quickly washed away.

Climbing the embankment coolly, the reanimated Hunter came to stand before the petrified giant.

Just before the pale figure's upraised stake stabbed into the big man's chest, he saw the dark shapes of men and women creeping one after another from the black surface of the water and up the slope. Something long and round stuck in the heart of each. They were all the victims of the Nobility who had been disposed of at

the river.

So this is how I die, the big man thought. *With a stake through the heart from this freak*. The stake sank into his chest. He saw a bloody spray billow out with a *poof*.

An unexpected wind blew against the gigantic body that rolled halfway down the embankment, ruthlessly tearing off his coat. There was no bloodstain to be seen. What's more, neither the chest of the big man nor the heart of the little man had been pierced by a stake. And there wasn't a trace of the horde of corpses that had risen from the watery depths.

At two fifty-nine Morning, D rose from his bed of hay and turned the light controls on, keeping the solar lamp dimmed as much as possible. A faint darkness ruled the barn. Strange things, creatures and phenomena alike, had a strong aversion to light.

Returning to his resting place, he stared at the corpse on its hastily improvised bed and at the woman who was neither living nor dead.

The matter of the woman herself didn't seem so urgent. If it wanted to, the vampire that had gorged itself the previous night could hold off for an interval of several days. What's more, because the vampire knew what D was capable of, the vampire wasn't likely to make a casual call on his victim. Despite the slim chances of attack, D had taken custody of her because he'd surmised what would happen if she were to be *summoned*.

Victims who fell under a vampire's spell came under a kind of long-range hypnosis and could unleash brutal attacks even on the people who were trying to protect them.

The most fearsome thing about this hypnotic state was the way it could surpass the subconscious limits humans imposed on their own flesh. Trying to hold down a victim thrashing about with the full power inherent in the human body—roughly seven times their normal strength—was a difficult task for a team of five men of like physiques. A graceful maiden shattering the shinbone of a professional combatant wouldn't even be considered news on the Frontier. Before it came to such a struggle, those attending to the victim would do their best to make merciless use of a stake. Those who should be protecting them became their murderers—was that a tragedy or a comedy?

But if that was the case, toward what end had D appropriated the creature's corpse? And what was the meaning of his weird conversation with the countenanced carbuncle?

The change came at exactly three Morning.

D's eyes shone mysteriously.

Without any extraneous action, the cadaver slowly raised its torso.

The dead body got up now and slipped off the table, its face alone remaining set in the blank mask of death. But, for something with all its internal organs extracted and a great subsidence in its abdomen, it possessed a tenacious, even mysterious, vitality.

"Just as I thought," D muttered.

The living corpse went to the jars and began a hair-raising activity. Skillfully removing the spring-loaded cap from one and plunging its hand in, it extracted the dripping entrails, ripped open its sealed wound, and lovingly pushed inwards, shoving its intestines back into their rightful place.

This activity, the sight of which might have driven anyone but D to madness, continued for some time. Having reclaimed its heart, lungs, stomach, and other parts, and naturally heedless of the great lump of viscera that had collected in its abdomen, the cadaver ran its muddy pupils over the surroundings. It began to move toward the entrance with an awkward gait.

D got up, too. The sheath of the longsword on the back of his coat shone dimly. Not a single bit of hay stirred. With muted footsteps he followed after the reanimated monstrosity.

The small silhouette went out through the entrance.

D stopped, and seemed to consider following it. He had no fear of the lashing rain, of course, but all of his dhampir senses detected a mass of powerful mental energy thronging to the back of the barn. Whatever it was, he couldn't yet see it.

From D's back rose the sound of his blade unsheathing. After that, there was no movement at all.

The presences—a horde of soaking corpses—surrounded him, young ladies and lads with stake-pierced hearts, their burial vestments vividly dyed with their own blood. They were the corpses of all who had fallen under the pernicious fangs of the Nobility and been thrown into the rushing waters since this village was first incorporated.

However . . .

"A psychological attack? They're using rather advanced abilities." D had already noticed that the rows of corpses cast no shadow.

"Long time no see, D. Never thought I'd find you here." The bloated corpse of a drowning victim, the only one that had been spared a staking, stepped forward. It was the Vampire Hunter Geslin. Could the enemy be trying to use some memory of this

man as a *way in*, to project their illusions into D's mind?

"How about it, D? Can you cut us down?" Geslin's right hand moved, and white lightning brushed D's cheek. Raindrops spattered the running blood. "You can't cut us with that sword of yours. But we can stick you with our stakes."

Wedges of wood glistened in the bloodied hands of the dead.

The needles of plain wood flying from D's right hand passed through the bodies of the dead and stuck in the barn wall behind them. Geslin chortled. "What do you make of that, D? Is this the best you can do? Just try it. Can't you cut us down?"

"I can cut you."

"What?!"

D's eyes gave off a fierce red glare. Parrying all the nonexistent stakes roaring towards him with a graceful movement, D charged into the very center of the besieging horde of dead.

Geslin's head was split it two, the expression of shock still plastered to his face. The head flew off a youth who had a stake held high and was ready to strike. Naked steel penetrated the bosom of a woman who was retreating in screams. A pair of fangs jutted from D's mouth. Who could have stood to look directly at that ghastly visage? This was no less than the slaughter of the dead by a demon of a man.

Rain splashed off the silver blade.

Amidst the wind and rain and darkness stood the lonely figure of D.

There was no one there. Just as it always was.

Even the cut on his cheek had disappeared. The whole battle had taken place in his mind.

"That's a relief. No matter how many times I see it, it's always an intense show," came the thoroughly disgusted voice from D's left hand. The Hunter had already regained his paraffin beauty and was scanning the area. "Can't fight your blood, I say. At any rate, that threw quite a monkey wrench into your scheme to see where that beastie was going to hook up with his cohorts. The question is, was it a coincidence or not?"

"If it was a coincidence, then that creature and the attacker yesterday are unrelated. If it was intentional, then all our mysteries are coming together around a single point," D said, brushing the raindrops from his shoulders at the door to the barn. Raven hair clung to his nigh translucent skin, and a desolate unearthliness hung over him, but still his beauty was beyond description. Surely even the most dazzling of women would pale before this youth.

Why, even the voice of the left hand seemed rapt as it said,

“Heh, it’s hard to believe you’ve gone all this time and never once turned your fangs on all the women and men who pursue you. I bet the most gorgeous princess on earth would offer you her smooth white throat if you just said the word. I have to give you credit for the strength of your will, if nothing else. So, what do you plan on doing?”

“Concerned about me?” D asked softly.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I was just asking if you were going up to those castle ruins. I’ve got a vague inkling of what went on there. Might even be that creature came from—”

“I know.” D’s words cut the grating voice short.

Exactly. Ever since he’d laid eyes on the creature lying in the field, D knew it was just like the things that had attacked Lina and him in the dark depths of the castle.

“Guess we’ve got to go then. Since his highness is up there, too.” Down on D’s palm, the countenanced carbuncle bared its teeth in an eerie laugh.

In the middle of a dim room, several shadowy figures gathered.

The room was filled with such a sense of the unearthly, it made the snarls of a multitude of beasts coming from very close at hand seem stripped of energy.

“I failed,” one of the shadows moaned. But, despite the import of its words, it didn’t seem perturbed. The voice was all the weirder for its serenity. “If that Hunter can parry a psychological attack, he’s a man to be feared. A dhampir, no doubt. And no average half-breed, either. What do you think?”

The shadow it addressed was silent.

“Forget I asked then,” said the first shadow, fairly spitting the words.

Surprisingly, the voice was still young. Judging by the way he spoke, this was the leader of the group—the ashen figure in gray. And, if that were the case, might the remaining two be his victim Fern and the boy Cuore? Even that young man wouldn’t have been safe for long in a den of vampires.

“Whatever the case, we can’t allow him to remain in the village any longer. Or to find out who we are.” The shadow’s arm extended, and he pointed to the third shadow. “Tomorrow, collapse the entrance way. Let me say this now to be perfectly clear—I will not allow him to interfere again. Next time, it’ll be *you* that gets taken care of, *regardless of what you are*.”

The shadow he’d indicated shook as if frightened, but it said nothing.

Something small moved over by the wall. All eyes focused on the entrance, catching the diminutive creature that entered to the creaking of the heavy door. From its strangely protruding abdomen up to its clavicle there ran a raw black surgical incision.

"Is this the only one to come back?" the shadow leader asked. "It would've been better to catch them right away when they got loose, but that was beyond our control. With the scent of fresh blood and meat everywhere, it doesn't matter that they don't have to eat or drink—they're going to want to run wild. Oh, well, soon enough this village, no, the whole Frontier will be in our hands. It all happens tomorrow."

The shadow's foreboding laughter was full of confidence. Pregnant with horror and mystery, darkness alone covered the downpour-drenched village.

CHAPTER 5

D awoke when cold light filled the barn to the eaves. He'd slept perhaps all of three hours. To a dhampir like him, it didn't matter whether he worked by night or day, but even his body demanded the occasional respite and sleep. Perhaps the shadow clinging to his exquisite countenance was due to the strain of having to work solely by day of late.

A fog had moved in, it seemed, and the whiteness slipped into the barn through the entrance and cracks around the windows, but it was not so thick as to hinder action. All the more so because in D's eyes this was no different from midday in fine weather.

Making his preparations with characteristic superhuman speed, he exited the barn.

His stride was smooth. More like a shadow than a cat. If stealth was an innate characteristic of the Nobles, they could hope for no greater silence than D possessed.

Entering a stable a short distance away, D stopped cold. Seven or eight yards ahead of him, the stone walls of the main house reflected the morning sunlight. Dressed in a white nightgown, Lina opened one of the windows and leaned out into the street. Right below the sill there hung a small window box. Stretching out her hand, Lina snatched up something white that lay in it.

D saw it quite clearly. It was a single white blossom. Though he didn't know what it was called, this tiny expression of life was a common enough sight along the roads of the Frontier. Who could've left it?

Pressing it to her breast, Lina looked down the road with an expression bordering on tears. The girl gazed for an eternity down the white road, hazy with fog.

Before long, the window shut quietly. D went into the stable, came out with his mount, and pointed it towards the ruins. Oh so quietly, as if trying not to make a sound, as if trying not to shatter a young girl's dream.

As soon as D was off the mayor's property, he started to gallop at full speed. The horse tore through the mist. The crusted remains of snow flew in all directions. Mist devils out to ravage crops were startled by this early morning rider and drifted down to see what he was all about, but they were crushed before they

could even touch him, and were left swirling in his wake.

Racing through the village, in less than twenty minutes he had climbed the hill and arrived at the entrance to the ruins. Hitching his horse to the edge of a shattered stone wall, the Hunter entered the courtyard.

Fog permeated the ruins.

Passing from the corridor to the hall, D was going to make straight for the entrance to the laboratory, but he came to a stop almost in the center of the hall.

He looked back at a picture on the wall. It was the same painting that put a sparkle in a young girl's eye as she stood before it, saying she wanted to study history.

The instant he turned back around and began walking deeper into the ruins, the ceiling and the wall around the door cracked. A red flash of light and savage gaseous energy came from the crack, headed for D. The time it took D to see this and make a conscious choice of how to avoid it would be the difference between life and death.

The impact swept D's feet out from under him and slammed him into the wall to his rear. Thick chunks of stone went flying, and the roar echoed through the hall.

Now a mountain of rubble lay in front of the entrance. It would be impossible to get into the rooms beyond without bringing in motorized equipment.

D was on the floor, his upper body resting against the base of the wall. The flap of his longcoat was caked white from the dust that rose from the impact. There was no way he could move. He had taken a blast of energy that destroyed hundreds of tons of rock in the walls and ceiling, and he had been smashed headfirst into a stone wall. Of course, an ordinary person would've been killed instantly by internal injuries alone.

To say the least, it was an unhappy coincidence that D happened to be passing through the place when the project to block the entrance the figure in gray had mentioned the night before was underway.

A lone traveler advanced on horseback through a forest road a few miles from the village. Bristles covered his rocklike chin, and the atrocious gaze he wore complimented his face perfectly. His look, and the rivet gun at his waist, gave clear testimony to the nature of this man. He was one of the outlaws that roamed the Frontier.

When there was even a little money to be made, this man would stoop to blackmail or extortion, and he had no qualms

about murder, either. The skin beneath his thick, electrically heated coat was carved by countless wounds from bullets and blades, and his right earlobe was missing, though horrible traces remained where it had been ripped off. While he was strangling a young lady in some village way up north, she'd torn it off in her death throes.

These last few days, he'd been hard pressed to find either good grub or a woman. Chances were he was imagining the pleasures that awaited in the next village, because a vulgar smile surfaced on his filthy lips.

"What the—?"

Before he pulled back on the reins, the man found himself doubting his own eyes. Fifteen feet or so ahead, a young lady stepped out from behind some trees and onto the road. That was enticing enough. But her curvaceous figure burned into the man's retinas.

The girl was stark naked.

What's this . . . a Frontier whore? Pro or not, I can't figure why she'd be out running around like that . . . Maybe she's wacko?

Although his mind had plodded along that far, the crass thug's reason melted away in an instant, and his brain became occupied solely by deeds that might be done with the girl. Still, he waited a moment, scanning the surroundings with a caution he'd learned through his numerous bloody encounters.

No one around? If so, this honey's a nut job all right. I can have her every which way, and kill her when I'm done. Way out here I won't have to worry about anyone finding her till she's nothing but bones.

His plan, however, didn't prove quite so easy.

When the man dismounted with a disarming grin, the girl looked back over her shoulder and, giving him a seductive glance, dashed off into the forest. The curves of her backside drove him crazy—round and firm as a succulent fruit ready to explode, as only a young lady's could be. Hitching his horse to a nearby tree, he took off after her. into the woods, into a world of darkness from which there would be no return.

He gave chase for perhaps all of five minutes, the breath rasping loudly from his nostrils.

Plunging through the same luxuriant foliage that swallowed the naked form, the man suddenly jolted to a halt.

The girl was lying in the meadow right in front of him. His gaze was riveted to her breasts, turning up to remarkable rosy knobs, and her damply glistening thighs. The girl moaned and twisted her lower half. There was precious little chance he'd

realize her intent was to show more of her ass than was really necessary. Her pale skin was strangely bloodless, and yet her lips alone were weirdly crimson, but the thug did not notice.

He fell on that white body like a black hunk of stone. Sucking and twisting her lips, he forced his tongue into her mouth. And the girl responded.

This is fantastic!

Raising his eyes in delight, he glimpsed the face of the girl.

She was laughing with the face of a devil.

As he tried to jump off, one frail arm held his body down, and the fingers of the other sank into his right hand as he made a grab for his rivet gun.

When the lips that curled back to reveal fangs closed on him, the man finally screamed. And long though it lasted, the deep woods drank it all.

When they were informed that Mr. Meyer was absent from school, Lina felt the eyes of the whole class needling her.

The village had learned of the incident the night before.

A monster of hitherto unknown type had broken into a farmhouse near the school, killing and eating a mother, child, and someone who was just passing by. To top it all off, one of the Vigilance Committee members who'd gone missing after he went to check the water level was found dead this morning under the bridge, and the confirmation that the body had been completely free of wounds caused quite a uproar.

That much might have been excusable, but when the mayor learned of this and headed straight for the barn, there was no sign of either D or the corpse of the monster there, just the woman sleeping as soundly as ever, but with a mark like a "t" on her forehead. Lina still wasn't sure if it had been drawn in blood or something else.

Of course the mayor was outraged, and he lambasted the Vigilance Committee for their negligence. On one hand he'd told them to ascertain D's current whereabouts, but he'd also admonished them to keep this information secret. But it was a very small village. By the time Lina and the others headed off to school, a sketchy version of the events had made the rounds to almost every home in the area. The fact that Mr. Meyer was the one who had apparently been carried off by the monster was probably leaked by one of the Committee members who had visited the teacher's house the night before.

Even though the secondary school instructor who came to

inform them of their teacher's absence pretended the absence was due to a cold, there was no chance of that shaking the dark conviction that flowed between the students.

Oh, not again. I hate this, thought Lina, sighing with grief.

School wasn't always a warm, nurturing place, partly because of the incident that occurred a decade earlier. Abducted by the Nobility, the children had returned after some horrible things had been done to them; in a Frontier village, that alone was sufficient cause for exile. The humiliation of the examination Lina underwent over the next few weeks opened dark wounds on her soul that still lurked, somewhere, even now. The strain had killed both her parents in rapid succession, and, even after the mayor adopted her, she hadn't been allowed to go near the other children for another two years. During that time, no matter where she went or what she did, the gleaming, probing gaze of the mayor or Vigilance Committee was locked on her every move.

They all know what's going on between the mayor and me, I bet.

Lina wanted to blubber like a baby.

Most likely they didn't know how he had forced himself on her on her seventeenth birthday, but knowledge of their immoral relationship had spread throughout the entire village.

Some rather iniquitous relationships were commonly permitted in Frontier communities. Villages that could be cut off from the outside world by rain or snow needed a guaranteed labor force—that was their greatest concern. If it weren't purely in the pursuit of pleasure, then any relations—be it between a man and someone else's wife, a mother and her own son, or a father and his daughter—could be termed valuable in so far as it might sow the seeds of new life.

In this era, mental defects and other problems traditionally caused by inbreeding no longer existed. For some reason, the Nobility had chosen to share the fruit of their genetic engineering expertise with the human race. Hereditary diseases were a thing of the past. Even the names of the diseases were no longer remembered by humanity.

No doubt it was the shadow from ten years earlier that made Lina's spirit sink like lead.

Cuore had never recovered from his dementia, and that fact alone was enough to terrify the villagers. And then, at the opposite extreme, examinations had determined that both Lina's and Mr. Meyer's intelligence had risen to a startling degree. That was the reason the mayor had adopted Lina; it was also the reason why all her classmates abhorred her relationship with him.

A woman made clever at the hands of the Nobility.

And yet, Lina wasn't openly teased or shunned, thanks to the brightness of her disposition, her splendid bearing, and the efforts of Mr. Meyer, who'd endured the cold shoulder from the villagers and did an excellent job of passing the circuit committee's test to become a teacher. It was impossible to say how much strength Lina drew from seeing him—a weakling and a crybaby in their childhood—standing up to the bullies and protecting her now.

Even Cuore, who started aimlessly wandering about the village after his parents' premature death, had saved Lina from harm. His decline in intelligence had done nothing to change his innately courteous and gentle character. Lina could still clearly remember how reliably his hulking form had shielded her from the stones other children had thrown.

And now she no longer had either of them to protect her. Although Cuore was in Fern's care, Mr. Meyer's disappearance was more than sufficient to earn Lina the evil, suspicious glances of the whole class.

"Well, Lina, we finally know the real reason you were chosen to go to the Capital," her worst enemy, Viska, said, loudly enough for everyone to hear. "I don't know what went on up in that castle, but you didn't have to keep all the rest of us living in terror for the past ten years. As soon as you're gone, things should be pretty peaceful around here again."

"Yeah, but there'll be hell in the Capital!" a member of Viska's clique said sarcastically, laughing shrilly.

Oh, that does it. I might have to smack someone now, Lina thought, about to arm herself with one of her leather slippers. But she restrained herself because she knew the remarks reflected what everyone in the class felt. The others just didn't say anything because they still counted her as one of their own.

That being said, it was undeniable that the whole class had become exceedingly distant since it had been decided Lina would go to the Capital. When one considers the import of getting to leave the Frontier, there were those who would never understand why the person representing the village was someone with a connection to the Nobility.

Well, let 'em say what they will.

Just as Viska was about to say something else to Lina, who was now in a fresh and easier state of mind, the substitute teacher from the secondary school came in and the morning's tribulations were at an end.

Advancing vapidly through math and physics, the school day was just about to enter third period when an unexpected siren resounded.

“Hey, what’s that all about?”

“Three successive blasts—it means to assemble in the square!”

“Maybe they captured a Noble alive?”

“Don’t be stupid!”

“Quiet,” the teacher ordered. “I have to go out. Your class representative will have to accompany me. The rest of you will have a free study period.” But he knew the students had ignored him.

When he’d gone, and taken Callis, the class rep, with him, everyone else busily prepared to leave—this was just what they’d been waiting for. There were some who rattled around in the lockers full of weapons kept in case monsters attacked, and others who raced to get their lunch boxes to bring home; in no time, the sound of the activity grew to quite an uproar, and a second later the students had all vanished, leaving the windows and doors still shaking.

Seeing how even the eyes of Marco, the shyest boy in class, gleamed with anticipation, Lina wanted to laugh. On the diversion-starved Frontier, children were more inclined to be excited rather than frightened when fearsome beasts ran amuck, so long as they didn’t directly harm the village. Aside from the giant behemoth or roc or other colossal monsters of legend, arrangements had been made to defend against most everyday creatures.

Plenty of adults were bustling down the street, but they said nothing when they saw Lina with her schoolmates.

The square was just about in the center of the village. Even if every one of the village’s nearly one thousand inhabitants were to assemble there, from 120-year-old Gramps Shakra down to the baby born some four months earlier, the square still boasted more than enough space to accommodate them all. Whether it was a festival or an exhibition of merchandise by traveling vendors, this was just the place for large-scale events of any kind.

When the students arrived with mud flying from their feet, some sort of bizarre show was just about to begin up on the wooden stage that’d been dragged into the square.

There, beside Vigilance Committee leader Fern and his haughtily puffed chest, was a type-three electrified cage—an iron enclosure that could contain supernatural beasts or savage, human-sized birds with high-voltage current. This in and of itself was not in the least bit unusual, but on seeing the prey it contained, the eyes of one and all went wide.

It was a human. However, what plunged every last one of them into the deepest depths of horror wasn’t the threatening

physique or countenance of this apparent outlaw, but the pair of fangs jutting from his greasy lips.

A vampire that walked by day.

Is this their leader? This thought screamed in the minds of all of them. The rain had abated near dawn, and the gray clouds that had masked the sky had finally broken. Waves of tranquil light tinted everything a pearly hue, but this square alone was congested with dark, night-evoking fear. Jostling through the elders who were settled before the stage, the mayor climbed a set of folding stairs to stand by Fern's side. He made a great show of ignoring the man in the cage gazing out at him with malicious eyes.

"Good people of Tepes . . . " he started to say in a voice much louder than necessary, then paused as he took up the wireless mike he'd just noticed on the floor. Not a snicker escaped from his listeners. Whether it was a Noble or one of their victims, they were looking at a nightmare creature that couldn't possibly exist —a vampire that could act without restraint in the sunlight. The gravity of the situation deeply shook them all.

"Good people of Tepes . . . " the voice of the mayor finally echoed to their stupefied ears through the ultracompact speakers set about the square. "As you know, in our recent trouble with the Nobility four from our village have died, and I've burdened our meager finances by hiring not one but two Vampire Hunters. But in the end, that was for naught—happily, it seems they are no longer needed. To be more precise, early this morning Fern here caught this thing on the northern road. The leader of our very own Vigilance Committee has good reason to brag—taking a vampire alive is something few out on the Frontier have done."

Seemingly frozen by the sight of this vampire scanning his surroundings with blood-soaked eyes, the villagers were finally returned to their senses by the mayor's somewhat coercive compliments. The audience mustered a smattering of applause. Of course, none of them could see the sardonic humor in the situation.

Fern took the mike in turn and told how, when the search perimeter had extended beyond the village, he'd run into a man in the woods who attacked him before he could say a word. With the help of his guard beasts he'd managed to take the attacker alive.

Everyone knew far too well the power of guard beasts, but still those creatures wouldn't do much good against a Noble, or even against one of their victims. Yet those normally inclined to doubt had proof positive right before their eyes; as the leader of the vigilance committee finished his war story, a tumultuous applause

broke out.

"That's great, Lina. Now you're in the clear."

Turning toward the encouraging voice, Lina was taken aback. The class rep Callis was smiling at her. A born leader and first-rate organizer, he was clear-headed and quite handsome. But Lina despised the coolness that lurked like a shadow behind his bright, smiling face, and she'd rarely spoken with him. For his part, he was used to the other girls in the village making a big fuss over him, which made approaching Lina a waste of time.

"What do you mean? Were you worried for me?"

"Of course. After all, we're classmates, aren't we?"

At his honeyed words, Lina wretched in the cockles of her heart. *How stupid can this jerk be? Here he comes, sidling up a little bit closer.*

"Hey, the mayor's getting ready to slather another address on us," Lina said, as she pinched the palm that'd stealthily been placed on her hand.

"It's almost certain the fiend in this very cage is the cause of all our recent troubles. That being the case, I propose we slaughter it now and pray that this offering will give us peace. What do you say to that?"

By this point, convinced that the true source of their terror had been captured, the villagers put their hands together as one, and the square was buried in vocal approval. In Frontier villages, it was not uncommon for animals to be sacrificed when praying for a bountiful harvest or safety in the coming year.

"That's horrible!" Without noticing the meaning of the words that spilled from her own lips, Lina felt her heart stop when Callis' shocked expression turned toward her. It was the first time she was ever aware of feeling that way.

Do I pity a vampire?!

Suddenly, purple sparks flew from the iron bars of the cage, and the man within shrank back with a scream.

"Okay, Fern, finish him off."

With a bow to the triumphantly nodding mayor, Fern stepped forward. The long wooden stakes he held in either hand were more like spears. The other members of the Vigilance Committee moved in and surrounded the stage.

The vampire in the cage seemed frightened and backed away, only to receive a massive electric shock. Discerning unrest and fear in that atrocious face, the people loosed mocking laughter and catcalls.

"You like that? Go on, try and run away again!"

"Ha ha, I think it's gonna start bawling. Some Noble you are!"

“Fern, don’t kill ‘em with one shot. Do it slow, real slow!”

As if to acknowledge the cheering, the Vigilance Committee leader waved to the crowd. Intoxicated with pleasure by this murderous show, the villagers couldn’t see that his lips were redder than normal and that something eerie lingered in his smile. Nobody questioned his assertion that this vampire was indeed a Noble, and that the vampire was the cause for the village’s woes.

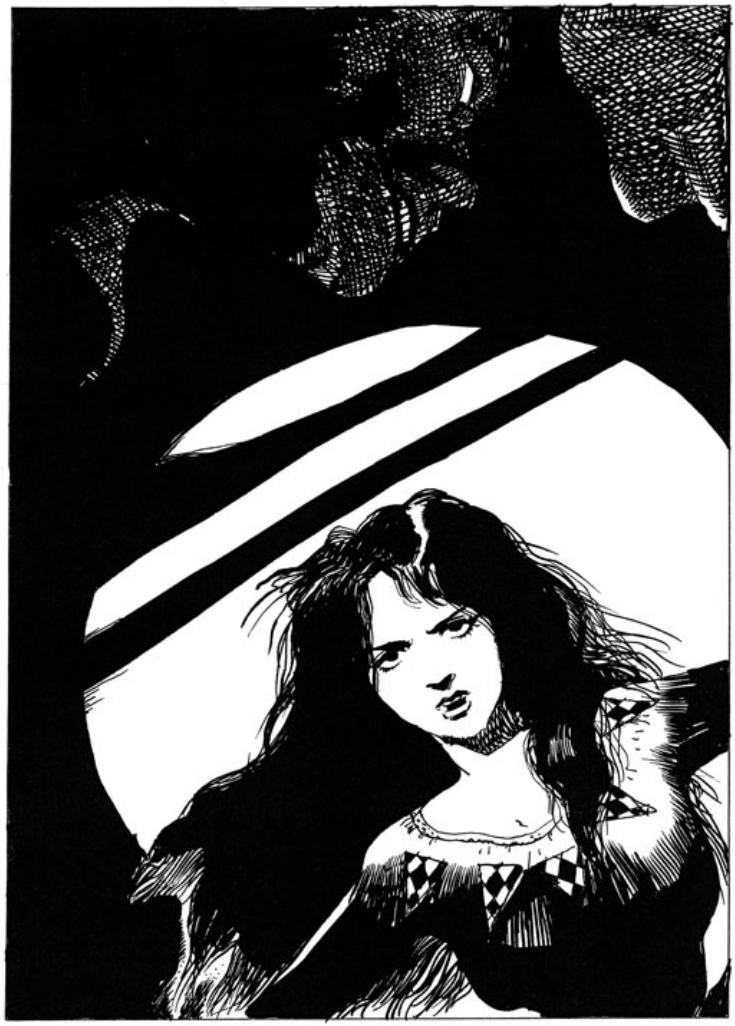
The spear lunged forward.

The vampire twisted out of the way. Sparks leapt from his right hand, and his exposed back was pierced by a quick thrust of the tip into his right shoulder.

Cheers rocked the square.

With a faint smile rising on his lips, Fern poised his spear again.

Lina pushed forward from the very back of the crowd. Sending mud flying everywhere, she shouted, “Stop!” Shoving people out of the way as she ran, she finally got to the stage.



"What the hell you think you're doing, Lina? Keep out of this!"

The girl didn't flinch at the mayor's words. Beautiful face and softly curved body trembling with rage, she opposed everything that was happening here.

"You're the one who should keep out of this, mister Mayor. I can't believe you'd do something so cruel. You're dealing with a human being."

"It's not 'mister Mayor,'" the old man bellowed. His gray hair fluttered more from anger than from the wind. "I'm your father. Why can't you call me that? Keep out of this, you little idiot! I'll whip the tar out of you later!"

"I said no, and I mean no," Lina replied, and mentally she tossed her head in defiance. *I couldn't even stand by and watch an animal slaughtered now. Why have these feelings come over me?* As if to push those thoughts back into their hiding place, she said, "Don't you think this is awful? If you were human, you'd be ashamed of yourself for torturing an unarmed person to death, and one locked in a cage no less!"

Restraining the mayor, who was about to explode with rage, Fern leaned down off the stage. Thrusting the bloodied point of the spear right under Lina's nose, he said, "Oh, I see. Then what you're saying is, it'd be better if we gave it a weapon before we do it, right? Fine by me. Why don't we let you do the honors, little chatterbox? You've had some training with swords and spears, haven't you?"

On the Frontier, where life and death existed side by side, it was customary for women to learn how to use weapons. Although it wasn't necessary to master gunpowder firearms, crossbows, and laser guns like it was for men, all of them could wield a short spear, a lighter version of a longsword, or a whip.

When the head of the spear was thrust before her, Lina grabbed it without hesitation. The wrath she felt toward the mayor and Fern and the villagers—for the entire human race for that matter—wouldn't allow this girl of seventeen to be cowed.

The mayor went pale, and a clamor ran through the inhabitants of the village.

At that moment . . .

A beautiful, rusted voice raced across the ground, leaving the wind twisting in its wake. "That's my job."

Every face—even that of the vampire in the cage, who seemed to forget the pain of his wounds—turned to the young man in black astride his horse. Each face took on an expression of wonder. With

the sunlight spilling through gaps in the clouds for his backdrop, this youth of a beauty rarely seen in the world glared down at them from his mount.

The instant they set eyes on his beauty, the men burned with envy, and the women became slaves of desire. However, in the next instant, those higher emotions were effortlessly blown away, and an ineffable terror took hold of the dark recesses of their psyches. It was a terror instilled by the unearthly aura of the Nobility.

The crowd parted, and D arrived at the stage without meeting so much as a second's delay.

Easily taking the spear from Fern and Lina, who'd both retained a steady grip on it, he asked, "So, what do we do?"

"Oh," Fern responded, his bonds of paralysis finally melted by D's voice. "I don't know where the hell you've been up till now, but it sure is nice to see that at least you didn't run off with your tail between your legs. This is just perfect. No matter how you slice it, you were gonna be out of a job anyway. If you're a Hunter, then act like one and give us a show before you're on your way. Right, Mayor?"

The mayor hemmed and hawed. D's steadfast gaze bored through him. The pressure Fern put on him couldn't begin to compare to the unearthly aura radiating from that youth.

"It, err . . . Well, it was me that called him here . . . And his work's not quite finished yet . . . "

"That's right."

The next instant, D leapt easily from the saddle and onto the stage. He exhibited remarkable recuperative powers for someone who'd met with an intense explosion mere hours earlier, but his stamina was probably due, at least in part, to the thing that lived in his left hand.

Seemingly heedless of Lina's infatuated gaze, he went over by Fern and clicked off the power for the electrified cage, having already removed the electronic lock.

"Hold it," came the cry from what sounded like the sheriff, but, seeing the door to the cage swing open smoothly, the hitherto paralyzed crowd gave a scream and retreated.

The loud thud reverberating behind D was the sound of the fleeing mayor tumbling down the stairs.

D tossed the rough wooden spear to the vampire sluggishly slipping out of the cage.

"It's strange meeting like this, but this is our destiny, hunter and hunted. Come on." As he said this, he didn't reach for the longsword over his shoulder.

The vampire started to move slowly to the right. Unable to use his right hand, he held the spear with a single finger of his left, his whole body boiling with flames of murderous rage.

Without a single telltale movement, the spear became a streaking blur in flight. Seeing it pierce D's chest, which was exactly where it had been aimed, Lina had the breath knocked out of her. The vampire leapt at Fern, grabbing the rivet gun at his waist. The muzzle, as thick as a man's thumb, pointed skyward with a speed that escaped the naked eye.

D was in midair. What Lina had witnessed was an afterimage left when he flew up with superspeed.

Along with a roar, high-energy gunpowder sent a stream of iron tacks racing at D's heart.

With one of the most glorious sounds in the world, the iron tacks were deflected.

Before he even realized they'd been parried by the drawn longsword, the vampire's gun-wielding hand was chopped off at the wrist by the naked steel slashing down from above. A backward thrust of the blade penetrated the deepest reaches of his heart.

Not sparing so much as a glance at the massive form as it fell in a bloody mist, D started to walk toward where Fern had frozen in his tracks.

Noticing that it was his left hand that held the bloody blade now pointed at Fern's throat, Lina knit her brow. The girl didn't understand that because of his opponent's injured right shoulder, D had fought with only his left hand.

"You got what you wanted. Next time, you'll be the one doing what I say."

His voice was low, but would brook no resistance. Fern's pale face bobbed negligibly up and down. D thrust his left hand right in front of it.

Seeing the red cross limned in the middle of that powerful palm, Fern's eyes shot wide open. For a few seconds, a wind pregnant with bloodlust cut across the square.

D's hand came down, and Fern let out a sign of relief. There was nothing, it seemed, out of the ordinary.

The crowd stirred again.

"So, what are you going to do?" D called down from the stage to the mayor, cleaning the blood from his longsword with one shake and gracefully returning it to its sheath. He must have meant what were they going to do about him.

Pale faced and still holding down the lump on his forehead, the mayor said, "I know what I said a moment ago . . . But, well, I

believe we've pretty much accomplished what we set out to do. Needless to say, you'll be paid the amount we agreed on. Good work."

"Fine," said D, nodding impassively. "But I can't leave the village just yet."

"What?!"

"There's something I still have to look into. Or is there some reason you'd want me gone?"

This time it was the sheriff's turn to shudder as that gorgeous countenance turned his way. "At the moment . . . no," he said with great difficulty. "But if your being here causes us any inconvenience whatsoever, we'll have to run you out of town."

"Agreed. I'll tell you one thing—if this man was responsible for your difficulties, then the female victim we have should be regaining consciousness right about now. We should check on that."

When the mayor and his group arrived at the barn, however, the woman they'd left there had a rough wooden stake hammered deep into her breast, and the dirt floor practically seemed to drink the lifeblood dribbling from the sleeves of her formerly white clothing, now soaked with red.

"Who could've done such a thing?" the mayor moaned, looking to the heavens.

"Don't know who it was, but someone in the village must've gone off half-cocked. I don't care if having her around gave people the creeps, there was no need to put her down like this." Saying this, Fern turned his eyes up at D. "How do we know it wasn't you? If that other guy wasn't behind all this, you still stand to make some more money . . . "

Fern's tough talk vanished in the back of his throat. Shifting his gaze from Fern back to the depths of the barn, D moved away from the group and started to put a saddle and saddlebags over his shoulder.

"Hey, wait. Where do you think you're going?" the mayor asked, running over to him in a fluster.

"You're a suspect in this murder. We can't just let you leave town whenever you please. After all, you were here with the woman until this morning." There was a tone of fretfulness in the sheriff's voice.

Silently, D pointed in a certain direction.

The mayor and sheriff followed his finger with their eyes, then turned back to him. "So that's where you're headed?" said the lawman. "The abandoned waterwheel mill's out there on the edge of the village?"

“If you want me, that’s where I’ll be. I’ll be back later for my pay.”

The men just watched in a daze as D galloped off.

When Lina’s classes had finished and she was getting into her wagon, Callis was waiting near the gate to the schoolyard. This was a rare occurrence, perhaps even a first.

When she rode past oblivious to him, he ran after her in a state.

“Please, wait up, Lina. I thought maybe we could go home together.”

“What’s gotten into you? You suddenly feel all friendly toward me? Tina and Miria and all the rest of your little friends will be none too happy with you.”

“Spare me. They just have this one-sided thing for me!”

Presumptuous as it was, he got his foot up on the step of the wagon, and, after quickly taking a seat, this optimistic Romeo even went so far as to try to take the reins. Lina slapped his hand and made a disapproving face. “Don’t try anything funny. Why don’t you just climb back down.”

“Oh, you’re a cold one. I was waiting because I wanted to talk to you. Say, wanna go into the woods?”

“And what, pray tell, would we do in the woods? Earlier, you grabbed my hand in front of everybody. I can’t imagine what you’d try if you were alone with me. If you so much as lay a finger on me, I’ll knock you flat.”

Facing him squarely to lay down the law, Lina swallowed her words. Something resting in Callis’ breast pocket glittered in her eye.

A single white blossom.

The one at my window this morning . . . It couldn’t be.

“Oh, this? I picked it just for you. Here.” The sharp-eyed playboy had read Lina’s reaction like a book and made his opening move.

She didn’t say a word.

This courageous girl was too kind to call him a liar. The flower passed into her pale hand.

“We’ll do the woods some other time,” Callis said, nearly in a whisper.

A dozen minutes later, as the boy watched the wagon disappear through the gate to the mayor’s home there arose in his eyes a look of cunning and self-confidence not at all appropriate for his age.

The wrath of the mayor awaited Lina at home.

As soon as she'd closed the door to her room, it was thrown open again. Lina's cheek rang with a slap as she whirled around, and the girl fell to the floor.

"What do you think you're doing? That hurts, you know." Knowing what she'd expected had come, she still put up some spirited resistance.

The mayor was furious. "You . . . you stupid little girl. Embarrassing me like that in front of everybody. Standing up for a Noble . . . a damn vampire. You little . . . "

Lina stuck her red tongue out at the old man as his ugly face congested with rage.

"Nobility or not, what's wrong with trying to stop someone alone in a cage from being killed like a wild beast? Did you have some kind of proof he was even a Noble? He was probably just a plain old victim. If so, he wasn't that way because he wanted to be. If the Nobility made me one of their kind, I sure as hell wouldn't want to go out that way. And since I wouldn't want it done to me, I couldn't let you do it to anyone else. You gonna lock me in a cage and have Fern stab me to death, too?"

The mayor's eyes were bulging in fury. Though his Adam's apple was moving, no words came out.

However, even though she'd gotten off her little rant, Lina questioned her own position. *Really, what's wrong with locking a Noble in a cage and torturing them to death?*

Before Lina was born, a group of Nobles had assailed the village and claimed nearly twenty victims before they were done. The tragic tableau ended with fathers driving stakes through their daughters' hearts, or husbands through their wives'. What the children later heard was a tale of tragedy between loved ones told with tears of blood, and they learned a deep hatred for the Nobility. In the hearts of these people, the Nobility were vicious beasts to be slaughtered—a feeling that the severe Frontier life helped foster. If by chance one were to be taken alive, anyone would think it perfectly natural that it would face the same fate as the vampire in the cage.

"You bitch, you. So you side with the Nobility, eh? You lousy little ingrate. You won't get away with this. Hell, no!" The mayor had the look of a madman.

"What makes me an ingrate?" Lina shot back. "The whole reason you adopted me was because you knew what kind of mind I had and wanted to send me off to the Capital, wasn't it? You were looking forward to the reward the village would get. And that's not all. You had your way with me when I didn't know

anything. Who is it that comes sneaking into my room every night even now?! Even the Nobility don't act like such filthy beasts. Even your touch makes my skin crawl."

Silence descended. Lina watched somewhat unnerved as the mayor's face swiftly paled.

"Is that so? Can't even stand my touch? Good enough. I'll touch you with this then!"

A black whip glistened in the mayor's right hand. Threads of drool hung from the corners of his mouth, and his eyes were laughing. The change was extraordinary, as if some darkness lurking within him had suddenly gushed to the surface.

Before Lina could turn and make a break for the window, the mayor's hand caught the collar of her shirt, tearing it open with a loud rip.

"Stop it. Have you lost your mind, you old fool?!"

A sharp crack turned her angry protests into screams. Lina fell, and in seconds, black and blue welts were rising on her back, their number growing with each snap.

Pushing the howls that had risen to the top of her throat back down with all her might, Lina endured the beating. She'd decided she didn't want to let the likes of this man get the better of her.

She tried to think about the white flower. Her expression became calm.

The mayor discarded his whip and climbed on her from behind. His dark red tongue licked at her wounded flesh.

"Quit it," Lina protested, writhing.

"Not a chance," said the mayor, getting her struggling hands out of the way while he kneaded her shapely breasts. "Does it hurt? I bet it does. But I'll make it better now. I'll make you feel good all over with this tongue of mine."

A clammy, lukewarm sensation crept over the nape of her neck, and Lina's whole body squirmed wildly. The mayor continued speaking, even as he took pleasure from the young body struggling in his arms. His voice was like coagulated obsession.

"I could keep at this and screw you to death now if I wanted to. Getting you run out of town would be child's play, too. But I can't do that. After all, you're going to the Capital for the sake of our little village. Mr. Meyer's vanished, and Fern's taken custody of Cuore. No doubt he'll spend the rest of his days as no more than a dim-witted errand boy. But you're special. I can't get rid of you. On the other hand, I can't let you get away, either. And I'm gonna keep having my fun with you till the day you have to leave town."

The mayor's mouth clamped onto the nape of Lina's neck. A forbidden act. Unable to stand it, Lina let out a scream. Because kiss marks on the nape of the neck were far too reminiscent of the marks left by the Nobility, it was taboo for even married couples to do this. The cruelty in the heart of this old man rivaled that of the very Nobility.

"No, don't, stop! Please . . . D!" she screamed with all her might.

The old man's lips pulled away from her. With evident bitterness he said, "Oh. So that's how it is, eh? That punk's caught your eye? Well, he's not around. I sacked him. Right about now he's setting up house all by his lonesome in the old mill. That's the perfect place for a drifter with the blood of the Nobility."

When Lina's head sank forward, the old man tried to push the girl down on the floor, and, for an instant, the strength went out of his arms. She swung her head right back up, smashing into the old man's nose with a terrific whack.

He fell over, squealing. Vivid blood gushed from between his cupped fingers. "Bitch! Now you've gone and done it!"

Lina grabbed the vase off the table and smashed it over the mayor's head as he attempted to rise. Fashioned from the ribs of a fire dragon, the container was light, but it had sharp protrusions jutting from all sides. Quite a few fragments lodged in his head, and the old man's face was stained with blood. Giving a cry, he collapsed again.

Lina's blood boiled. Now their situations were reversed. And, to Lina, it was a pleasant change. 'She pulled back her foot to kick him where it counts, but, true to form, she thought better of it and stopped.

As she gave the door an energetic slam, her litany of curses carried right through it. "Screw you. I won't be coming back here any time soon. I hope your head wound gets infected and you die."

Lina headed off to the mill in her wagon. The past few days these streets had seen little pedestrian traffic, but apparently everyone felt safer since that vampire had been killed, and a number of faces now watched with astonishment as the wagon raced by.

She was there in about twenty minutes, but, taking measure of the old, dilapidated mill, she saw and heard nothing but the squeal of the waterwheel and the base growls of its hydroelectric motor. D's things weren't even there.

Maybe he'd already left town?

Anxiety quickly withered Lina's spirit. A chill that she hadn't felt in the least when she left her house now seeped into her through her pores. Looking up, she saw the sky was still dark.

The world was rife with fear.

Lina left the shack.

The wind whistled over her head. Though the wind should have borne some foreshadowing of spring, it was colder than she ever could have imagined. It invaded her leather coat through the collar and sleeves, stabbing at her exposed back.

"Damn. Of all the lousy luck. Wonder if I should go back home? But then, I don't much fancy another beating. What to do, what to do . . . "

Deciding to wander around a bit while she mulled it over, Lina went back to the wagon and took a sliver gun out of the storage compartment for self-protection before setting off on foot down the path.

It seemed that even Lina was comforted by the death of the vampire this afternoon. She was as yet unaware that the female victim had been killed, so the possibility that the vampire in the cage had been guilty still had a strong base to work from.

When she'd gone so far the outline of the mill was no longer visible, the wind called her name.

She turned, but could sense no one around her.

The new grass fluttered in the wind.

Tightening her grip on her weapon, she started walking again. Before she'd gone ten steps, she heard it.

Lina.

This time there was absolutely no mistaking the sound.

"Who is it, and where are you?" she turned around and shouted, and the wind responded.

Lina, Lina, Lina.

"Come on, where are you already? Seriously, I'll shoot." Heedless of the contradiction in that, the girl was overtaken by fear.

Awaken, Lina, the wind said.

It was a voice she'd heard before. Lina sifted through her memories intently.

Still don't understand, do you, Lina? Awaken. You must awaken.

The voice danced all around her. It laughed beneath her feet, whispered at her ear, bellowed above her head. *Lina, Lina, Lina.*

"You're starting to piss me off, mystery pest!"

When she raised the sliver gun, still lacking a target, a particularly powerful gust of wind smacked her between the eyes. Her balance was gone in a flash. The hand she was certain she'd

set on the embankment beside her swept right through the air without meeting the slightest resistance. Lina fell headfirst to the bottom of a benighted pit. Judging from the impact, the drop couldn't have been that great.

Looking back the way she'd fallen, she saw a circular opening about seven feet above her. The soil banked up toward it, forming an incline. Surmising that she'd be able to climb out somehow or other, Lina gave a sign of relief.

Lina, the voice cried out. Without a doubt it was a man's voice, and this time it was very close.

Fixing her gaze before her, Lina was enveloped by surprise.

Ahead of her lay an unsettlingly spacious area—a subterranean chamber. The depths were shrouded in darkness, but in the light stabbing down through the hole above her she could see it was quite vast.

On the boundary between darkness and light stood a gray figure—the source of the voice.

"Damn, that hurt . . . " Starting to rise, Lina pressed her hand to her hip. Desperately garbing herself in an air of calmness, she wrung the words from her throat. "You're that character from the night before last. I just knew the guy they caught this morning was someone else. So, is it supposed to be my turn now? If you come near me, I'll shoot!"

She aimed the sliver gun at him, but the shadowy figure didn't seem in the least bit perturbed. In a leaden, low voice he asked, "Don't you understand? Seeing this place, don't you recall anything?"

"What is with you?! You just keep saying the same damn things over and over," Lina said angrily. "This is the first time I've ever fallen into this blasted hole. No reason why I should remember anything. So stop your yammering and reach for the sky. I'll shoot!"

The figure raised one arm. Just as she was admiring this docile display, he swung it in a wide arc.

"Take a good look. At this place. At this *lab*. Remember. Remember what happened ten years ago."

Finally Lina noticed that the scene before her was the interior of some sort of room. It was apparent at a glance that destruction had ravaged this place, leaving a mountain of rubble on the stone-paved floor, but the toppled tables and the shapes of what seemed to be colossal machines looming motionless in the depths of the darkness testified that the gray man spoke the truth.

However, there was something strange about the scene.

Although the place where Lina stood was a dirt floor in a hole

in the ground, the boundary between that and the room was terribly indistinct.

The room looked so close she could reach out and touch it, but it was in fact preposterously far away—at least that was the impression she got.

However, it was something else entirely that shocked Lina now. The shadowy gray figure whose face D's computer had revealed—someone she was sure she had never seen before—knew about what'd happened a decade earlier!

"Don't you remember, Lina? Very well then, how about this?" Disregarding Lina's astonishment, the shadow made a sweep of his hand.

Ripples ran through the depths of the darkness, eerie things defying any attempt at metaphor.

"Well, Lina, how's that?"

"I . . . I don't know. What are these things? Keep . . . keep away from me . . . " Her voice cut out. As if a white scalpel had sliced open her brain, fragmented memories blazed to life.

That's right, this is where . . . And where they . . .

The vision faded away abruptly.

"I don't understand. Don't come near me!" Anxiety and relief hung in her cries, and her finger worked of its own volition.

Fired off with a sigh-like snap unique to highly pressurized gas, a tiny tungsten needle pierced the heart of the shadowy figure. The figure smiled silently.

The eerie things continued forward.

Lina's pupils opened wide, like one who has peered into the abyss at things no one was meant to see.

They—the eerie things approaching—had called her name. *Lina*, they said.

There was a flash. And another. Light knifed in through the incisions in her clouded mind. *All these people are . . .*

Suddenly, the shadowy figure looked upwards.

The *things* raised a commotion. And yet, she couldn't hear their voices.

A problem has cropped up. We'll meet again, Lina, the dwindling shadow said.

A fear completely different from what she felt before now assailed Lina. Dropping the sliver gun, she started to scale the incline without so much as a backward glance. She had the feeling that as soon as her hands reached the lip of the hole some seven feet away the vision would vanish.

The forest awaited her.

What Lina crawled out of was a small hole in the ground just

over a foot and a half in diameter. The grass grew thick and wild around it, and even the most concentrated gaze would be hard pressed to discover the opening.

Lina swiftly brushed the dirt off herself.

Taking a deep breath, she set off back down the road. After she'd walked forty or fifty yards, she heard the echo of hoofbeats closing on her from the rear.

Was *this* the problem the gray man been talking about? If so, that shadowy figure must have been able to discern this sound several hundred yards away, and through the ground no less.

Having stepped to the side of the road, when Lina turned around her face was quickly suffused with joy.

"D!"

Unsettlingly beautiful, he gazed down at Lina from his horse. "What are you doing? What brings you out here?"

Lina paused for a moment, then made a quick answer. "Well . . . actually, I was out looking for you. Would you be so good as to put me up this evening?"

An inquiring glance from D.

Lina told him she'd left after a falling out with the mayor. Without asking the reason or any of the petty details, D silently offered his hand, then pulled her up on the back of his mount. Before the horse had taken a step, she stammered, "Er . . . umm . . . "

"What is it?"

"Is it okay if I put my arms around your waist?"

"You'd fall off if you didn't, wouldn't you?"

"Yep." Her cheek pressed against his back. Hard and wide, the firmness of the skin beneath came right through his coat. She'd heard that the bodies of dhampirs were much colder than those of humans, but that didn't seem to be the case with D. He was warm.

Before she knew it, tears spread across her cheeks.

"Are you crying?" D asked. He inquired in the same way one might ask for directions on the street.

"So what if I am? Everyone gets the blues from time to time. Don't keep badgering me about it."

Lina didn't know that it bordered on miraculous when this youth asked anyone anything about themselves.

D fell silent.

"Say, D . . . the ruins are off the way you were coming. Were you up there again?"

"That's right. Looking for another entrance."

"Another one? What about the usual one?"

"It's been sealed. No one can get in that way now." Giving a

little shake of his head, he said, “You can forget about all that stuff. Shouldn’t you be studying or something?”

“Killjoy,” Lina replied, butting D’s shoulder with her head. “With a brain like mine, it’s not like I need to do any more studying at this late date.”

“Oh, that’s right. You’re the girl genius.”

“That’s me all right.”

The horse arrived at the mill, and the pair crossed a bridge over the fairly swollen brook before going into the shack. Perhaps due to the evening almost upon them, the wind bore a chill, but it was a far cry from the harshness of the white season.

As Lina watched him from behind with a mystified expression, D asked the girl, “Is it so strange that I crossed running water?”

“Er . . . yeah. After all, you’re a dhampir, right? Oh, I probably shouldn’t have mentioned that.”

“To be sure, water poses a problem for me. Nobles have been known to drown in water less than waist deep.”

“I wonder why that is? The biology of the Nobility is so mysterious.” Her questions seemed completely at odds with her innocent voice and naive countenance. For some reason, Lina had an intense curiosity about the Nobility.

Giving no answer, D went to the corner of the dusty shack and set down the saddle and bags he’d brought from the horse, then pulled out a blackish palm-sized package. With a tug on the protruding cord, the package rapidly expanded into a very comfortable-looking sleeping bag.

“You’d better sleep in this. It has a built-in heater. You should get through the night without catching a cold.”

“But what about you?”

“I’ll be resting outside. Being down against the earth suits my nature more. Don’t give it another thought . . . I’ve never even used that before.”

“But . . . ” She was about to say more, but she noticed D concentrating his senses on something outside.

“It seems they’ve come for you,” the Hunter said.

“No way. I refuse to go back there.”

Before long, nearly a dozen men on horseback had arrived at the far side of the brook. Both the mayor and the sheriff were there, and the rest were members of the Vigilance Committee led by Fern. Each and every one wore a strangely stiff expression. What they had to do—and the thought of who might stand in their way—made them look tense. Their opposition was standing in front of the shack.

The blue glint of the pendant on his chest made the men

uneasy. Perhaps the horses sensed something, too, for there was no end to their whinnying. Atop their mounts, the men shook ever so slightly.

"State your business," D said softly. His was a tone well suited to the tranquil afternoon light, but the horses halted at once. Did their riders realize they were frozen with fear?

"As if you didn't know already," sneered the mayor, who now sported a black hat, and he jabbed out one arm to point to one of the shack's windows. "We're here to take Lina home. No use trying to hide her. If you don't hand her right over, we'll make you wish you had."

"It doesn't matter to me either way, but I don't know what she'll have to say about it."

Suddenly the wooden shutters of the window swung open, and Lina poked her head out. Well prepared, she had her tongue sticking out already.

"Screw you. Who'd be stupid enough to go back there? I'll be staying here a while. I'm practicing up on surviving in the wilderness. Kindly keep out of the way, Daddy. Oh, did you know your face looks kind of swollen?"

The special spitefulness she saved for the last bit was delicious. The distended purple face of the mayor donned a look five times more crimson than his wounds. With a glance to his side, he said, "What the hell are you doing, Sheriff? What we got here is a case of a father trying to get his daughter back. We'll take her back by force if necessary, right?"

"Well . . . " the sheriff began hesitantly. The rest of the men looked the other way. Every one of them had witnessed D's swordplay in the village square. "Well, if she says she doesn't want to go, there's nothing we can do. And I believe your parental authority over Lina ran out the year before last, to boot."

Parental authority expired—in other words, an individual became responsible for his or her own actions at the age of fifteen in most communities on the Frontier. Their environment demanded independence.

"Oh, you worthless sack of dung. You'd just stand by and let this half-breed drifter ruin my daughter? Your ass is fired. When we get back to town, the first thing I'm going to do is convene a council meeting."

The sheriff shrugged.

"Okay, now will somebody . . . "

"Leave it to me," Fern said to the mayor, his voice brimming with self-confidence as he leisurely dismounted.

Resting both hands on the baskets on his hips, he had a steady

stride as he headed over to square off with D.

"Knew it'd come down to this sooner or later." He sounded like his position was well covered. "It's too late, so don't even think about saying we can have her now."

D didn't make a move. He had the air of a young poet listening to the song of the wind.

It seemed as if even the voice of the brook had been silenced.

"Watch yourself, D. He's got guard beasts in those baskets." Lina's words injected tension into a situation that wasted no time in exploding.

Pale flashes shot from D's right hand, and the baskets still attached to Fern's waist fell to pieces. Two creatures fell to the ground—a weird spider and a lightning-discharging cloud. As the legs of the spider were free from injury, either it'd regenerated already or this was a new beast.

Fern egged them on with eerie syllables.

A jolt of purple shot through the spot where D had stood, spraying the wall of the shack with sparks; the needles launched by the airborne D stopped halfway between him and the monsters. The instant he realized billowing white threads were twisting around him, D mowed through the wind with the longsword in his right hand.

"Oh," Fern exclaimed. He'd just watched the adhesive liquid that'd held not only behemoths but the figure in gray cut to shreds like so much cotton thread.

However, D's body veered appreciably as he tried to leap the brook in a single bound. In the next instant, he landed waist-deep in the current with a splash.

Who, if anyone, had actually seen the tentacle that'd shot from the water and wrapped around his ankle like a whip?

And there wasn't just one—the second D hit, a number of identical tentacles flew up and wrapped around both his wrists as tightly as possible. Something with what looked like a striped carapace broke the current ahead of D.

"I thought as much—not quite as sharp in the water, now are you?" Fern laughed, showing a lot of teeth. "See, when I heard we'd be going up against you, I went back to my house and picked up one of my aquatic guard beasts. From what I hear, dhampirs are as weak in the water as the Nobility. Okay, so now you get your pick—stay where you are and drown, or let the sparks from my electric cloud shock you to death."

"Stop it. I'll go back!" As Lina screamed these words, the cloud and spider approached the water's edge.

"Don't do it, Fern!"

"Never mind that, kill him!"

The conflicting shouts of the sheriff and mayor were effaced by an awe-inspiring sight.

The purple bolt aimed at the immobilized D bounced off the oval carapace bursting through the water's surface.

All of the spectators felt their eyes bulge from their sockets. Who could have believed that the gorgeous youth was rising from the water along with the beast that held him? The one who'd been dragged down was doing the dragging.

All of them had just witnessed the monstrous power of the Nobility, what many said was the strength of fifty men, and now, before their watchful eyes, D's left hand flashed out. Extending his five fingers and making a slashing motion, every tentacle his hand touched was severed. Free from his bonds, D sailed through the air like a mystic bird.

A silvery light deflected the flash of purple, then bisected the body of the cloud, swinging back with a speed the eye couldn't follow to sever the head from the giant spider, as well as the web of threads it dropped on him.

The sound of the brook returned to the ears of the onlookers.

Throwing the gore from his blade with an elegant flick, D turned his back as if nothing had happened.

"Too much for you, boys? See how tough my bodyguard is?" Lina jeered in a voice bursting with joy. The men had lost even the will to say anything as D walked away.

After the aborted battle, their rude visitors had gone on their way.

The dark of night seeped between the trees, and the pale moon came out.

Lina heated some synthetic coffee over a small electronic traveling lamp. She'd brought the beverage from her wagon. The lamp belonged to D. A silver cylinder six inches high and two inches in diameter, the lamp could also serve as a thermostat and heater, or as a refrigeration unit. And, obviously, you could cook on it, too. Travelers couldn't be bothered carrying around a lot of bulky items.

Deftly lowering the heat-absorbent silicon pot, she poured the contents into two cups made of the same material, then called out to D.

"It's ready."

"I thought I told you I didn't want any."

"Oh no you don't. Drink it. It'll warm you up. Oh, what a beautiful moon." Going to D's side, she forced him to take hold of

the cup. “I’ll cut us some jerky, too.”

“I don’t want any.”

“And what are you supposed to do if you don’t eat?” But even as she said this, Lina withdrew the offer. “Well, fine then. I don’t have much appetite either, today.”

“Is your stomach bothering you?” D asked without turning around.

“Let me think. I’m not always like this—anyway, dhampirs are really awesome.”

Nothing from D.

“A little while ago, I took a look at the corpse of that guard beast out in the middle of the river. The marks on its tentacles almost made it look like they’d been bitten off. Surprised the heck out of me.”

D was silent. Lina closed her eyes softly and drank in the perfume of the moonbeam grass wafting in through the window. The wind was singing in the trees. Maybe D was listening to it.

“D . . . that’s an odd name. What’s the D for? Devil, death, danger? Any of them would fit you to a T.”

“Tomorrow, you go home,” D said in a subdued tone.

“No way.”

“Surely you know what I am by now. If anyone tells the exam board about this, it’ll probably spell the end for your dreams of the Capital.”

“I don’t care,” Lina giggled, taking D’s left arm. “If that happens, I’ll go off with you. The wife of a Hunter . . . now wouldn’t that be a life of thrills galore?”

When D turned his rightfully dumbfounded face to her, she added, “Just kidding, that was a joke. Just say I can go with you, and that’ll be fine.”

“Quit your nonsense and go to bed. I have to leave early tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll have lunch waiting for you,” Lina joined her thumb and forefinger in the okay sign. She even winked at him. “Give ‘em hell . . . hubby.”

D heaved a sigh. It was a long sigh, the kind that hadn’t once escaped as he battled monsters or the Nobility. It seemed even this youth, who was like clockwork crafted from ice, was subject to the occasional malfunction.

“Tell me, D, where do you come from?” Lina asked with a sober expression. “Where did you come from, and where are you going? Or the Nobility? Or even mankind?”

D turned and gazed at Lina. Perhaps he had caught a certain minute anxiety in the words of the girl. “Tough questions.”

“Don’t you know? Even someone like you, who knows both worlds, even you don’t have the answer? What is it to live by both day and night, what is it to be human, what is it to be a Noble . . . don’t you know?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I really want to know. Tell me.”

The aroma of moonbeam grass wafted around the two of them.

D moved to the door without a word, then leaned his body against one wall. Lina took a seat on a piece of framework hanging a foot off the ground.

The world of the night lay before their eyes.

"To be a Noble, most likely, is to live by night," D began softly, with his longsword in his right hand and a cup of steaming coffee in his left. "The potential power inherent in the darkness of night and the shadowy influence it has on the Nobility down at the very molecular level are mysteries today—even during the Nobility's golden age of science, they couldn't begin to unravel them. The question of why the flesh of the Nobility is invincible, the secret of how they can live eternally, ageless and immortal so long as they're spared from sunlight or a blow from a stake, or the riddle of why that blow has no effect whatsoever unless taken through the heart. It's nothing if not ironic that they, the first creatures in the history of the world to reach a measure of longevity that could never be surpassed, were anguished as no others by trying to discover the secret of their powers."

"I wonder if the field of genetic engineering could've offered some clues? Although I did hear the information from every possible gene was collated in the Nobility's computers."

"The process of decoding the information contained in every single gene was completed more than five thousand years ago. But that's not where the problem lies. Once they'd discovered the gene that prevented aging, they must have asked themselves why such a gene had come into existence."

"Where do we come from, where are we going? I guess that remains the eternal question for all of us. Noble and human alike. But what did the power of darkness you just mentioned have to do with any of this?"

D nodded and brought the cup to his mouth. Noticing how Lina smiled, he scowled and took a drink.

"Is it any good?" Lina asked in a buoyant tone.

"Yep."

"I'm glad."

Clearing his throat, D began to speak again. "It's common knowledge that the vital functions of the Nobility all center around darkness itself. This gave rise to a certain hypothesis. It suggested that the darkness of night might hold the primary cause of the powers of the Nobility, or the gene responsible, if you will. That is to say, perhaps the Nobility absorbed some ghostly information belonging to the very darkness in the form of this gene, or so the theory went."

Lina's eyes were sparkling, shining with the expectation and anxiety held solely by those who wrenched open the heavy door of the unknown and beheld the light of truth spearing freely forth. Sparkling relentlessly.

"That's the gene of darkness, isn't it?"

"That's right."

"If only we could understand the structure of it, the riddles of the Nobility would be solved. 'Where do we come from, where are we going?' And the answers would apply to mankind, too. D, didn't they ever form this hypothesis—that humans are furnished with the gene of light?"

The moonlight caused their neat profiles to stand out stronger and whiter. The song of the wind, the aroma of grass.

"That's right," D said. "To be human is to live in the light. When you consider the length of their respective life spans, humans don't amount to much when compared to the Nobility. From a physiological standpoint, they're terribly frail as well. But when you take the potential energy of the race as a whole—"

"Light surpasses darkness," Lina muttered softly.

That was one sort of destiny.

"But the Nobles we've been seeing now . . . " Lina was about to say more, but hemmed and hawed.

In the cockles of her heart, someone was crying out to her. *Don't say it*, they said. She got the feeling the dark voice was somehow connected to her fate.

"Nobility who walk in the daylight . . . "

D brought the cup to his mouth again, and gazed at Lina. Shaking her head as if to reassure herself, she said, "There couldn't be any such thing."

Something shiny rose in Lina's eye. Before it could spill over the rim, Lina threw herself around D's waist. Sobs rocked her shoulders.

She didn't understand what made her so sad. She didn't know what she was afraid of, either.

She felt helpless, like she was alone at night walking down the road. And that night would see no dawn, for all eternity.

D set his cup on the floor and stroked her hair softly.

I just want to get out of this village, Lina wished with all her heart. *I want to go to the Capital with him. Just the two of us, together forever.*

The song of the wind could be heard. The pair didn't move for the longest time.

Unexpectedly, tension raced through D's body.

Lina fell to the floor, still posed as when she'd clung to him.

D stood by the babbling brook.

There was no change to the surroundings.

Perhaps D's sense of them alone had changed.

Why haven't you come yet? It was the same presence from the

rainy night. *I'm waiting for you. Waiting there.*

Where is "there"? What's the significance of those ruins? D asked this without uttering a word, without even thinking.

That was the only rule in this conversation.

I may have failed, the presence said. *If so, I must dispose of them all. There isn't much time. I'm waiting.*

Waiting for what, or for whom? D asked. *What do you mean by waiting?*

There was no answer to those questions.

Come quickly. I must go. This has gone on for such a long time, but it'll go on so much longer. Much longer . . . So much longer . . .

Somewhere within D, the presence suddenly vanished.

So, it's the ruins after all then? D looked back at the shack. Lina was standing in the doorway. D's eyes narrowed.

An expression that was not quite fear nor wholly anger occupied Lina's face.

"What's wrong?" he asked as he approached her.

Lina shook her head. "It's nothing . . . really. You took off so fast . . . I was just a little scared, that's all."

Pausing a bit, D then nodded. "You should get some rest."

"I suppose you're right."

Lina wasted no time in returning to the hut and getting into the sleeping bag. It was so warm, thanks to the thermal sensors that read the external air temperature and body temperature and maintained the level of warmth most conducive to sleep.

D's presence faded away. *I bet he'll sleep with the darkness and the song of the wind for companions, his ear to the ground*, Lina thought. *Or does he have trouble sleeping at night? What are the dhampirs anyway?*

Behind her closed lids, an ash gray figure floated, and it spoke in a weird voice. *Remember what happened ten years ago.*

Lina shook her head ever so slightly.

Another voice. *I must dispose of them all.*

Lina had heard the voice of the presence, too.

PEOPLE OF THE TWILIGHT

CHAPTER 6

Her surroundings were awash with crimson.

What stained them was a mixture of hunger and thirst. It made noises and beckoned to her will.

Her will tried to resist. It had accumulated much thus far—love, hope, kindness, dreams, grief, and, finally, rage. This will developed as she had lived her life, and some called it her "personality." The answer it always gave to the invitation was no.

But the time was drawing near.

The crimson surroundings busily besieged her will, diligently trying to pacify the tough walls of reason with the caress of instinct.

Gradually, the walls were crumbling.

The falling fragments were instantly assimilated by the hunger and thirst. Her will felt something sweet, as its senses were stripped away. The feeling was something akin to the joy of discovering the world where she really belonged.

And yet the core of her will resisted.

Swelling with spitefulness, the crimson lurched forward, ready to swallow the will whole.

The gruesome battle raged on.

I'm melting. Being absorbed. Changing. Becoming a . . .

When Lina opened her eyes, D was just about to leave the shack. The light slipping through the window and cracks in the walls was a hazy blue. It was near dawn.

"You heading off already?" she asked, rubbing her eyes. D stopped in his tracks and turned.

"It's still early. Go back to sleep. And when you get up again, go home."

"No way! I wish you'd get that through your head." As she spoke, Lina crawled from the sleeping bag.

"Aren't you cold?"

At this remark from D, Lina realized she was wearing nothing but a blouse.

Now that he mentioned it, though the wind was quite cold, she

didn't feel the chill.

"It's kind of warm today, isn't it? I always have been warm-blooded."

Whether her answer satisfied him or not, D went outside without seeming to take much notice. Stretching, Lina followed.

"The ruins again? There's nothing there, I'm sure."

D was silent as he put the saddle on.

"Wait up, I'm going, too."

"You can't. Go home. And then go to school. Shouldn't the exam board be here by now?"

Doing some quick figuring, Lina extended two fingers and waved them at him. "Not yet. I've still got two days." She remembered that soon a great load would be off her chest. In two short days, she could bid farewell to this village.

But, Lina thought, *all my tomorrows will be here in two days. I wonder if tomorrow coming is a good thing or not?* "Please, D," she said. " I won't get in your way. If I do, you can send me right home. Take me with you. I'm afraid to be left alone."

"Do what you like," D said with a nod, though she'd been certain he'd refuse. "But if you come, it's because you want to. I won't even spare you a thought."

"Fine by me. Leave me behind whenever you like."

Lina gleefully strode toward the wagon.

"You forgot something." D gave a toss of his chin toward the entrance to the shack.

"Huh?"

"Seems someone came and left this while I was sleeping. It's not for me. Must be a sophisticated guy."

The dubious face of the girl shone like the morning sun when she caught sight of something, a small white shape, left by the entrance.

A single bloom.

Gently taking it in hand, she slipped it into the breast pocket of her blouse. It seemed the mysterious delivery boy was always watching over Lina.

"Looks like you're not all alone after all." Even D's voice, as emotionless as ever, sounded like it was showering her with blessings. "If anything were to happen, someone would grieve for you."

Perhaps D knew something already.

Lina's thoughts were a thousand muddled pieces. "When school's over, is it okay if I come back here?" she asked.

"Do as you like. Of course, there's no guarantee I'll make it back in one piece."

Lina fell silent. Behind his soft words lay a world of carnage a young girl couldn't possibly begin to imagine.

Lina shook her head. She shook it over and over, desperately. "Not to worry. I'm sure you'll be back," she said, trying to convince herself. "I'll wait as long as it takes."

D reined his horse around silently. He kicked the heels of his boots into its flanks, and his mount galloped away without a moment's hesitation.

After the thunder of hooves had faded into the depths of the forest, Lina climbed up into her wagon and took a peek at the sundial in the storage compartment.

It was much too early to head off to school. However, she didn't think she could handle her anxiety if left alone with it for long.

Why didn't I tell D about what happened yesterday? she thought. *About that mysterious hole, and the shadowy figure and bizarre creatures I ran into down there? Or about those words?*

The shadow of the abominable events of a decade earlier grew all the heavier in the silence, and now it was poised to clamber onto her shoulders at any opportunity.

Lina suddenly remembered Cuore. Maybe the shadows of the past were giving instructions to him, too.

Guess I'll go see him, she thought. She'd heard where he was from the mayor.

Lina gave the horses a lash.

On a narrow road, D suddenly stopped his horse and scanned his surroundings.

It was a perfectly normal track through the forest. Here and there, the last white traces of snow punctuated what grass remained, and the brown strip of road ran on forever. Nor was there anything out of the ordinary about the morning breeze blowing against him. Nevertheless, D's senses, the supernatural perception possessed by dhampirs alone, told him he wasn't going where he wanted to go.

How was this any different from the road he'd taken the day before?

Pausing a bit, D once again clomped down the road. After riding for a minute or so, he stopped. The scene that greeted his eyes differed not one iota from the last one. The brown strip, the grass, the trees.

"Stop running around in circles," his left hand suggested.

"So, we've been sealed off in another dimension then, as I

thought," D muttered. "We could keep going down the road like this until the end of time and not get anywhere."

Take two points in space and fuse them together at both ends, and whatever lays between is trapped forever, only able to keep moving within the confines of the closed dimension. The real question was, when had his enemy learned this little trick?

"So, what do we do now?" the voice asked with delight.

"We've got no choice but to get out."

"Oh. And how would we do that? If we were on the outside it'd be a different story, but in the whole history of the Nobility there's never been a case of anyone busting a containment dimension from the *inside*."

"There was a magnetic containment field in the lab up in the ruins," D said, getting off his horse. "As you could tell by watching the way the hill works, it was made to deal with normal human beings. It's not *half* enough to contain me."

The voice was silent, but it was a silence pregnant with agitation and fear. "You're the boss," it finally replied, "but I don't know where on earth you get these crazy ideas. I don't want to be anywhere near you when you break through."

"As you like. But until then, I need you to do your job."

Tethering his horse to a nearby tree, D entered the woods. Gathering dead branches as he walked, he snapped off the twigs before piling them on his shoulder. When he returned to the road some ten minutes later, both shoulders were loaded with as much as would possibly fit.

Piling the heap of wood on the ground like kindling for a fire, D began digging up the soil. He didn't use his sword, a stake, or anything else. With all five fingers lying flat, he artlessly thrust his left hand into the ground, scooping out clods of dirt like his hand was a shovel, and piling the dirt in a mound beside the kindling.

But this was no plain soil. The earth was black and hard, packed solid by countless passing loads. What indescribable strength that hand must've possessed, to slide wrist-deep into the earth with such consummate ease. In no time, he'd dug a hole big enough for one person to lie in comfortably, and had accumulated a corresponding volume of dirt.

"We're all set," he said, smacking the soil from his hands.

"Not quite," the left hand protested. "Earth, water, fire, wind—we're still short water. Bringing you back to life is one thing, but we can't hope to succeed in breaking out of a sealed dimension if we're short even one of them."

"No cause for alarm."

Standing before the mound of dirt, D rolled back his coat and

shirt sleeves, exposing his left forearm to the wind. He brought his right index finger to bear just above the wrist, at a point where the artery was. Both finger and nail were gracefully in keeping with their owner. Just what sort of trick he'd employed was unclear, but merely running the finger across the white flesh left a thick vermilion line, and bright blood gushed from the wound, pouring down on the lumpy black earth like a warm waterfall.

With evening so far off, this was a weird piece of work to see on a sunny little trail through the woods.

After making sure his lifeblood had sufficiently soaked the clods of earth, D wiped the same finger across the gash. The bleeding stopped, and there wasn't even a trace of the wound.

Not surprisingly, his complexion was a bit paler, but it was disturbing to see how deftly he put the fingertip dripping with his own blood in his mouth, taking that little bit of sustenance.

Did he plan on using these arcane materials against a physics-based phenomenon like this sealed dimension?

"Taking from life to give life, eh?" the left hand fairly moaned. "A miserable bit of business to be sure. But really, it's scary how coolly you can do it. Guess it should come as no surprise, since you're . . . "

"Enough."

With that one word from D—his look pale, cold, and unearthly, changed by the single drop of blood he had tasted—the voice was silenced.

Taking two branches from the pile of kindling and holding one in each hand, D put the end of one against the side of the other and rubbed them together vigorously. He didn't appear to put much strength into it, but both branches burst into flame, and, when they were tossed back onto the mound of dead wood, heavy black smoke and fierce flames instantly sprung skyward.

Earth, water, fire, wind—all four elements had been assembled.

"Now it's your turn," he said.

His left hand reached for the flames. Then into the flames.

The wind howled, and, perhaps guessing something, even the horse whinnied.

There. The blazing pillar of flame became a thin line that was sucked, like smoke, into D's palm!

"That makes fire and wind, right? Earth and water are next," he muttered in a beautiful voice, as his pale skin regained a luster that could rightly be termed bewitching.

Lina stopped the wagon a short distance from Fern's house.

She didn't think relying on common courtesy would see her through this visit safely. She'd probably be sent back to the mayor before she'd even had a chance to see Cuore.

So she decide to do it by less legitimate means.

Walking until she could see the walls of Fern's compound, she ducked the woods. Following the wall, thirty feet down she found what she wanted. There was an opening at the bottom of the wall just about big enough for Lina to fit through. It was a little-used bolt hole she remembered hearing Fern's daughter mention. The precocious Bess had used this to escape the watchful eye of her nagging father and meet with boys.

A little more, just a little more now, Lina mentally chanted as she squeezed through, eventually coming out behind a plastic structure that appeared to be some sort of breeding coop. Not far ahead she could see the main house, and behind that the roof of the barn. The property was eerily quiet, perhaps because it was still early morning, but she knew from growls and howls spilling from various small structures spread about the place that the guard beasts were already awake.

I'm in trouble if any of these critters have a sharp nose and a loud bark, Lina thought. *But I suppose I'll be fine so long as none of them sink their teeth into me.* Checking that there was no one around, Lina made a quick dash for the barn.

Maddening as it was, there was truth in what the mayor had said—there was no way a man like Fern would give Cuore a room in the main house.

The barn was quite a bit larger than the one at the mayor's residence. The door wasn't barred. That was proof someone was inside. When she pushed open the door, the reason was immediately clear.

The heavy stench of the beasts assailed her nostrils.

The barn doubled as a breeding place for guard beasts. Given that Fern had lost his wife early, and that he only had Bess to help him take care of the creatures, there was an extraordinary number of them. Lina cocked her head.

The shack was sectioned off by panels—partitions fashioned from metallic alloys, glass, plastic, and various other materials that had to withstand the acid, flames, and whatever else the guard beasts could spew. The sight of a giant spider like the one she'd seen a day earlier, a monstrous snail-like creature some seven feet long, a mammoth quadruped going berserk behind a semi-translucent barrier, and countless other strange beasts made Lina nauseous. With a sudden whoosh, a gout of flame shot into

the air down at the far end of the barn.

"I've had quite enough of this. What kind of sicko would keep these creepy things?" she cursed in a low voice, though she continued bravely on. Once past the monsters' pens, she entered an area hemmed in by farm implements and piles of feed containers. The stink of the savage beasts was thinner, but the air had become strangely chilly.

"Cuore?" she called out in a low voice. "Cuore, it's me, Lina. Are you in here?"

"Too bad."

Why did that cheery voice make her whip around with a scream?

"Bess! For goodness sake—don't scare me like that!"

As Lina took a breath of relief, her classmate approached her in a pure white robe with the collar turned up.

"If you're looking for Cuore, he's not here. He's staying somewhere else."

"Somewhere else? But your father took him in."

Bess laughed. She drew closer. For no particular reason, Lina backed away. Before she knew it, she was in the corner of the room. She felt boxed in. Her foot brushed something hard.

Turning to look, Lina's face grew stiff. It was a coffin. Apparently, it had been exhumed from a graveyard, as dried mud still clung to it. She hadn't seen it before, hidden there behind the bales of hay.

"Bess, what's this for? Did someone pass away?" Even as she was saying it, Lina half-realized the truth. "Aaaaaah!"

Something cold caught hold of her ankle just as she was about to step away. She screamed, and the lid of the coffin slipped ever so slightly, revealing a pale hand.

Desperately, she wrenched her way free, but Bess blocked her escape. "Relax and stay a while, Lina," she said. The bloodshot eyes gazing fixedly at Lina nailed her to the spot.

Behind here, there was the sound of something hard hitting the ground. She spun around.

Fern was standing in front of the coffin. His insulated vest and somewhat filthy pants—these clothes she'd seen so many times before—served to fuel the fear bearing down on Lina's reason.

"That's a hell of place to be taking a nap." Her voice quavered pitifully as she said it half in jest, and Fern's mouth twisted into a grin.

"I was gonna go out and get you, but I'm glad you came to us. I'm sure everyone will be plenty happy."

"Hold on there. Who exactly is this ⬜⬜*everyone*'? I came here

to see Cuore. Where is he?" Lina asked, estimating how long it would take to run to the door.

"He's with *everyone else*. I'll bring you to meet them all soon enough." Fern laughed again.

Seeing the fangs peeking from either corner of his lips, Lina cried out to Bess in desperation.

While the girl in the white robe bared her fangs, she was also unbuttoning her clothes. "I've been so lonesome, Lina," she cooed. "I couldn't go out to see anyone, and I've been so hungry. After all, ever since I drank Papa's blood, I haven't had anything to feed on but the guard beasts. And on top of that, Papa . . . "

Her pale-as-paraffin hand made a motion, and the white garment fell to the ground.

For the first time, Lina realized there were some things so terrible you couldn't scream, no matter how badly you wanted to.

From the neck down, her classmate's body wasn't that of a living human being. Her flesh was black-and-blue and shriveled dry, and beneath the painfully prominent ribs only the lump that must have been her heart continued grotesquely hammering away, beating out the pulse of something without life.

"Papa's been drinking my blood." Bess smiled enigmatically. "Every day now, every single day, he kisses me on the neck and drinks his fill, you know. He says he's wanted me for a long time. And after all that, he won't even let me drink a little bit of his."

"This is . . . this is just too . . . "

New fears shattering the old. When Lina bolted for the door like a scared rabbit, one of the withered branches that was Bess's arms caught her and held her close.

She felt cold breath like moonlight on the nape of her neck.

"You know, I wanted you. I always used to think about you at school. I wanted to kiss you at least once. And now I will."

"Stop it!" Struggle as she might, the arm pressing against her body had the strength of steel.

"It's okay, isn't it, Papa?" The hunger and passion was now laid bare in Bess's voice.

Fern considered for a bit, then nodded. "The others will probably have a fit, but a mouthful or two should be okay. After all, even if we leave her be, you know what'll happen sooner or later."

These weighty words hammered Lina with a strong primal fear.

What would happen to her sooner or later?

When those raw, warm lips brushed the nape of her neck, Lina's reason utterly collapsed. Madness battered its way through

the wall of fear, and something burning hot gushed out all at once.

Bess was thrown against the far wall, screaming awfully, her body spinning like a dervish. Regardless of how Fern felt at the sound of those thick boards snapping, not even a trace remained of the faint smile of a vampire watching his prey.

"Well, now . . . we should've expected no less," he groaned. Lina began to run. He pursed his lips, and eerie syllables flowed throughout the barn, calling to his guard beasts.

Lina slowly returned toward Fern, walking backwards now.

A few yards ahead of her, grotesque figures began filing through the door one after another—a giant spider, a colossal snail, a mucus-dripping creature shaped like a sea anemone, a mass of writhing purple tentacles. There was an army of guard beasts.

The mob of shapes closed around Lina as she backed away, her color completely fading.

"We won't let you get away again," Bess laughed, as she leisurely got to her feet. "So, come to me. At any rate, you're already . . . "

Lina covered her ears, her whole being recoiling against whatever Bess was about to say.

The ring of foul-smelling beasts squeezed tight around her.

“Okay, all set,” came the voice from D’s left hand.

D nodded.

With the exception of a smattering of bloody mud and a fistful of ashes giving off a thin wisp of smoke, the outlandish materials had disappeared. Who would’ve believed all of that could be consumed by a little mouth no bigger than the tip of a pinky finger?

Without a sound, D sailed up onto his mount.

Giving his cyborg horse a pained glance for just the merest instant, he lashed it hard.

But, in this eternally sealed dimension, what was the point of this dash on horseback?

“Where’s it been fused?” he asked, training his piercing gaze straight ahead. The wind rang in his ears.

“Three hundred yards from here. It’ll start warping back around any time now, so you’d better watch yourself,” the left fist said teasingly.

And what did it mean by that? The dimension was onto them.

Watch. See how the stands of trees lining the road, the bushes, even the sky and the road itself twist like a veritable mirage, dissolving like paints in water and surging after D as he gallops by?

It was a wondrous sight, as the gale raised by this gorgeous youth melted the world and pulled it after him.

“One hundred and fifty to go,” the voice said with pleasure. “One twenty . . . One hundred . . . Almost there.”

D’s pupils reflected only the landscape before him. No fear, no anger, no sorrow there. It seemed he was always that way. Increasing his speed even more, the moans of the wind became a maddened scream.

“Fifty . . . Thirty . . . Ten . . . Now!”

With this word, the whole melted and the crumbled universe touched D’s back and reversed direction. It was as if the dimension had been turned inside out.

The next instant, however, up in the laboratory in the ruins, fire spouted from a small device.

A millisecond later, the auto-repair circuits went into operation, but the speed of the destruction wreaked by the extreme energy force that had broken through the sealed dimension far exceeded that of the countermeasures.

Destruction pitted against reconstruction.

Losing the ability to make proper assessments, the repair circuits adjusted the programs to draw on all the energy in the

ruins. The rip in the sealed dimension overlapped with dimensions in other completely different locations.

D's body flew through the air, sailing up into a space that held nothing. From the corner of his eye, he glimpsed his cyborg horse being broken back down to its constituent atoms.

1945. It was unfortunate, to say the least, that five Avenger torpedo bombers happened to be flying over the seas around Bermuda when the sealed dimension made contact with the area.

1872 and 1888. The crew of the ocean liner *Marie Celeste,* sailing the Atlantic bound for Genoa, Italy, and Jack the Ripper, out prowling the East End slums of foggy London, were *simultaneously* sucked into the sealed dimension, vanishing from the pages of history. The repair circuits should probably be praised for the part they played in the latter of those disappearances.

3046. An alpha-class black hole moving at 1250 miles per second, with a perigee of 170 million miles suddenly disappeared an instant after swallowing Pluto. Because of this incident, scientists among the Nobility, who were in the process of constructing interstellar rockets to escape to other planets, were subjected to great criticism, and the senior staff on the project, from the director down, were reassigned.

The overlap took zero real time to occur.

1901. Visiting the Palace of Versailles in Paris, Anne Moberly and Eleanor Jourdain both ran into one Marie Antoinette as she was sketching in an arbor in the garden. Under pseudonyms, they penned a faithful account of their experiences, publishing it in 1911 under the title *An Adventure.* Needless to say, that Marie Antoinette was none other than the French queen who, along with her husband Louis XVI, was dispatched into the mists of time by the revolution's guillotine in 1793.

4018. While eating dinner in his home, the *human* artist Vernon Berry witnessed a certain *Noble* attacking a beautiful woman in her bedroom in London, 1878. Though it took Berry three months, he managed to complete a portrait of the attacker. And thus the painting that for nearly six thousand years stood as the crowning masterpiece of all the images of the Sacred Ancestor came into being.

All the shortest effective distances between two points had overlapped.

An intense gale knocked Lina and the others to the ground, and, as she tried desperately to get up, Lina saw the most gorgeous figure in the world standing between her and Fern, as if to shield her.

"D!"

Comprehending the situation at a glance, the Vampire Hunter advanced without a sound. In this terrific gale that made it hard to even raise one's face, this daring figure actually looked like he was enjoying it. The monstrous beasts retreated with groans.

"So, it was you after all," D said softly, gazing at Fern and his daughter. "Tell me something before you meet your end. Where's your master, the figure in gray? How do you get in?"

Even crushed as he was by the otherwordly aura emanating from the Hunter's physique—beautiful as darkness crystallized—Fern bared his fangs. "They're all in the ruins. But there's no way to get to them anymore. Anyway, you're gonna die right here."

D was in motion before he heard the arcane call to arms, moving of his own volition right into the heart of the pack of savage beasts that surged forward.

His naked blade snarled. A head with compound eyes flew off, tentacles like those of a cephalopod rained down. Fresh blood gushed out, and the flames issuing from one of the monsters were truncated by a flash of silvery light.

It was battle beyond compare, and a quiet one.

There was neither whoosh of slashing blade nor scream of severed bone. The wind even blasted away each and every cry from the monstrous beasts. Finally, the guard beasts lay at D's feet, without having scored a single hit with their pernicious claws or beaks or fangs.

A flash of light flew.

About to pounce on Lina, Fern tumbled to the floor with wooden needles piercing both knees. Making a desperate grab for the compressor-powered gun on his hip, his hand was nailed to the ground. Bess had her back up off the ground, but couldn't move any further. The gaze she trained on D was strangely feverish.

The bare blade was shoved in front of Fern's face.

"Answer me—where's the way into the ruins?"

His soft words, devoid of threats or coercion, froze the blood of a fearless vampire. For the first time, it dawned on Fern that the dashing youth before him was no ordinary dhampir.

"What . . . what the hell are you?" he asked in the midst of a crushing fear that made him oblivious to the pain in his shattered knees and his now two-fingered right hand. "Someone who's been made one of the Nobility ought to be more than a match for a human half-breed bastard. And yet, you're . . . "

The naked blade swished through the air, and one of Fern's ears went flying.

"I'm a Vampire Hunter. Now answer me." His tone was as just as soft as before, but with an underlying force that was overwhelming.

"I . . . I know," Bess fairly moaned. Slowly, she approached the site of her father's bloody battle with the youth.

"Don't you dare tell him—arrrgh!"

Fern's threat was cut off together with his other ear, which went sailing through the air.

"I'll tell you . . . Just let me taste your blood, O gorgeous one . . . " Bess's voice quivered with longing and delight.

Clutching the arms she extended to him like withered branches in his left hand, D asked just one thing. "Where?"

"It's . . . "

"Watch out, D!"

With Lina's cry, D made a backward leap of some ten feet. While still in midair, a mass of energy that defied imagination struck his beautiful face.

The air rang twice, with a bang like an air-filled paper bag suddenly popped.

Bess and Fern's bodies had swollen from the inside, then blown apart in an explosion of blood and chunks of flesh. With gory spray and scraps of meat raining down on her, Lina let out a scream.

The wind, which had just died down, rattled the barn on a completely different scale. Beams of heavy steel alloy bent, and screws shot loose.

D realized that the energy mass that had annihilated the bodies of Fern and Bess was the same life-form that he'd encountered three times before. The laws of physics stated that two things couldn't occupy the same place at the same time.

So, I was right—this is a foe after all, he thought. *But someone's consciousness summoned this thing. And, whoever that is, even they can't completely control it.*

He had an idea who that *someone* was.

The invisible being raised its voice.

Lina covered her ears.

It was then that the fragments of red and pink started moving toward the energy mass. The blood and bits of flesh that had once been Fern and his daughter were sucked toward the thing, briefly coming to rest against its indiscernible form, before being almost instantly absorbed.

It wasn't that this manifestation of mental energy desired them. Rather, it used them as sustenance for its creator.

Someone or something was just beyond the door.

Leaping, D was struck once again by a massive invisible fist of energy. He fell back to earth. He shook his stinging head lightly and put his left hand to the ground to support his body. This concentration of energy surpassed imagination.

There were many supernatural powers that could create something from nothing. The spirit beasts spawned by conjuration were one example. However, the energy beings were subject to the same laws of nature as everything else, so naturally there were limits to their power. It would have been a different matter if they were nothing but raw energy, but these energy forms also had intelligence.

In light of that, the energy mass that hindered D's actions must have been created by a being of unearthly power. D had only survived the first hit because of his own powers, and because some of the energy from shattering the sealed dimension remained with him. But he might not be able to stand another hit.

The energy form turned and headed for D. The wall creaked, then snapped with an awful sound.

"D!"

D's face, which had been turned toward the floor, looked up now.

Did the death bearing down on him catch a glimpse of the eyes radiating beams of crimson light, or the pair of jutting fangs? The left hand resting on the ground gripped the hilt of his sword.

As she watched, Lina got the impression she could clearly see the arc as D swung his blade and the "shape" of the hulking thing as it relentlessly advanced.

When the two met, sparks devoid of color or sound flew throughout the barn. Lina's brain burned.

The energy vanished.

D dropped to one knee in exhaustion.

Rubbing her head all the while, Lina ran to him. "D, are you okay?"

"Nothing to worry about it. But could you take a look outside the door for me? See if there isn't someone lying out there."

"I'll be back in a flash."

Lina went to the door, looked around a bit, then returned. "There's no one out there. You think maybe they got away?"

D thought for a moment, then laid back on the ground.

"Are you okay? Should I go get a doctor?"

"You needn't be concerned. I'll heal soon enough. What I'd like to know is, what brings you here?"

"I came out looking for Cuore. Just a sec, I'll go get you some water."

Before D could stop her, the girl had disappeared through the doorway.

When she returned a short while later, tin cup in hand, D had already gotten up. Even when he'd been on the floor, his expression hadn't shown that anything was wrong with him, or that he was even in pain. Lina was half-tempted to wonder if he'd just been teasing her.

"Sorry. I had the darnedest time finding the well. Here you go."

D was silent as he took the cup she proffered, then drank a mouthful. Not that his body desired it. He was merely responding to Lina's hospitality. When this girl was around him, D did things that those who knew him would never imagine. Perhaps realizing as much, Lina was beaming, but soon her brow clouded and she asked, "So, what the heck was that thing? Is it the same thing that showed up that night we found Cuore?"

"Probably. It's a mass of superdense energy. When they found out they'd not only failed to keep me sealed away but that I'd also broken through here, they probably came by to keep Fern and his daughter from talking."

When Lina asked him about it, D briefly recounted the incident with the sealed dimension. While she was only a girl of seventeen, he recognized she was intelligent enough to comprehend his story.

"Wow. I guess you can do some pretty amazing stuff," Lina said, her eyes wide with wonder, as they walked away from the barn.

When all signs of the living had left the barn, two things remained: a deep depression in the ground right where D's left hand had been until the instant he'd met the energy form with his blade, and something lying in one of the guard beasts' cages near the doorway. Not only was the latter hidden by a metal partition, but it was also in a state that bordered on catalepsy, so it wasn't all that surprising that D had taken no notice of it.

It was Cuore Jorshtern.

"Another failure, it seems . . . "

At last, the low voice was colored by impatience. In a room in the ruins illuminated weakly by a single lamp, two silhouettes deeper than the darkness were conversing quietly, as if crushed by the density of the Stygian blackness.

"If they're not back by now . . . ," another voice said, trailing off glumly.

If one of the voices belonged to the shadowy figure in gray,

who could the other be?

"My, but that Hunter's a tough one," the first shadow said. "I never would've thought he could break out of that dimension."

"My sentiments exactly."

"Oh, well, I've already thought of a way to beat him. Rest assured. I'm more concerned about Lina. Hasn't she *remembered* yet?"

"I did try to persuade her." The second shadow paused thoughtfully. "Her time just hasn't come. Remember, each of us awakened separately, didn't we?"

The first voice, gravely weighing the situation, didn't immediately respond. "Only two days until the exam board arrives," it said at last. "This has to be settled today or tomorrow. We're left little choice. We should bring Lina out here instead of waiting for her."

"But that's . . . " The second voice was clearly shaken. "It's by no means certain the amplifier would yield favorable results. Lina's mental processes, in particular, are delicately complex. If it were to go poorly, the damage could be irreparable. Just look at Cuore."

This time it was the first voice's turn to groan. "Hmmm . . . But in return, he gained the power to produce *that thing*. Very well. We'll wait just one more day then, shall we? In the meantime, we can take care of that interloper. Good enough?"

Saying nothing, the other shadow seemed to nod.

After a short silence, one of the shadowy figures began to mumble, "And yet . . . " It wasn't clear which of them spoke. "Can't you feel it? That there's someone here besides us . . . "

"Impossible."

"Someone is watching us. Someone is laughing. Watching our actions and laughing at them . . . from somewhere in the long distant past."

"Stop talking like that."

The voice was silenced and the pair of shadows moved off through the murk. In their wake, only the darkness remained, almost as if to say darkness alone suited them.

Lina stopped the wagon at a fork in the road. If she continued straight ahead she would go back to town, while the path stretching to the left led to the hill with the ruins.

"Nothing else will bother you now," D said from horseback. The mount had been commandeered from Fern's place. "I'm going to the ruins. And you—"

“I’m going home. I know that part by heart by now.” Lina shrugged her shoulders and stuck out her tongue.

“Good. Come tomorrow, this will all be over.”

Feeling the gentleness in D’s voice, Lina bugged her eyes a little. She thought she should say something, but, by the time her lips moved, the beautiful silhouette was already dwindling against the sun that filtered through a sieve of overlapping trees.

For a long time, Lina didn’t move from the spot. When she did move, however, it wasn’t to go straight ahead, but to the side.

The wagon turned a hundred and eighty degrees, thanks to some surprisingly masterful handling by the young lady, and sped back the way it had just come, wheels creaking in the tire ruts all the while.

Lina lashed with the whip. The wind ruthlessly buffeted her brooding countenance.

In about twenty minutes she was back at Fern’s house.

Riding as far as the courtyard, she leapt down from the driver’s seat, a canteen from the storage compartment in hand. Racing to the barn as if she’d forgotten all of her earlier fears, she pulled Cuore from the guard beast’s cage.

Lina had deceived D. Cuore had been lying out on the path, and she’d hidden him in the cage when she said she was going to fetch some water. Even she didn’t know for sure why she’d done such a thing. Was it that she didn’t want D to find out something she needed Cuore to tell her? She wasn’t sure.

Propping his head—which reeked of grease and dandruff—on her knee, she forced Cuore to drink some water, and he opened his eyes, coughing and sputtering.

Spying Lina, sense took residence in his muddy pupils.

Though she gave a sigh of relief, Lina found her heart wrung by how horribly emaciated his face looked as he tried, with little success, to form a smile.

He looked like a skeleton draped with skin. He was so terribly thin, like everything in his powerful frame had been ripped right out of him; he looked like he might be on the brink of death.

His body felt unusually light to Lina, as she lifted him up, and, while carrying him, she couldn’t keep a few tears from coming to her eyes.

Why now, now that a good ten years had passed had all the gears started running in reverse? Didn’t Cuore’s wasted form presage her own fate and that of Mr. Meyer? Her tears sprung from that thought.

When she’d finally slid Cuore up onto the driver’s bench, Lina heard hoofbeats approaching quickly from the direction of the

gate.

Lina bit her lip. Who should discover them but the very last people she wanted to see right now—the men of the Vigilance Committee.

"Well, now, look who we have here," said the second-in-command, Corma, as he stood up in the stirrups. Noticing Cuore's condition, his eyes glittered cruelly. He had a pole of shiny black iron slung across his back. His real trade was clubbing lesser dragons and bears to death for meat and hides that he could sell. "Seems like something ain't quite right here. What's up with Fern? Ain't he around?"

"How should I know?" Lina replied, glaring back at the gawking men. "Go ahead and look for him. I just came out to talk with Cuore. He looks so bad off, I was just taking him to the doctor's. If you don't have any further business with us, kindly get out of the way."

"That's awful serious, now, ain't it? Well, I wish I could just tell you to be on your way, but something just ain't right about how thin he's got. You'll have to hold your horses a minute."

At a signal from Corma, a few of his men went into the barn and the main house, then came right back. One came out of the barn with an agitated expression and reported that the guard beasts had been massacred.

In a threatening tone, Corma said, "Looks like we've got business with you now. So, are you gonna come along with us?"

Having thoroughly combed the interior of the ruins, D returned to the courtyard. The passageway to the subterranean lab was sealed by several tons of rubble, and there was no sign of another entrance.

Why was D still so obsessed with the ruins? His contract as a Vampire Hunter had been terminated, but he knew his work wasn't yet done. Could it have been professional pride that kept him in the village?' Well, that was part of it. But that gelid beauty of his—a sublimation of anger, sorrow, joy, and all other human emotions—was lent a hue akin to vindictiveness by the outcome of the activities that had continued for centuries in the depths of this laboratory. Still, even if those feelings were the reason, did D himself even notice?

"Can't find it at all, eh?" his left hand laughed scornfully. "But even if you did find it, what'd you intend to do? What happens when you know for sure the results of those experiments a decade ago? It'll just make for that many more dark nights. The fate of

those four kids was decided ten years back. No one can change that. Or could it be . . . ”

“Could it be what?”

“That you’re doing this to meet *him*?”

D’s expression stiffened for a moment, but calm quickly returned. “You may be right.”

“Oh ho! Grown a human side, have you? Then it looks like this interminable wandering hasn’t been a complete waste.”

Suddenly, the sky clouded darkly. Even the sound of the wind died sharply.

D’s right hand stretched for the sword on his back.

The courtyard was no longer the courtyard.

With every inch of his body, D felt *it* rising into being.

His immediate vicinity was pitch-black. Allowing not even light itself to pass, its density was comparable to that of a black hole. But as incredible as the density of the darkness was, it was several orders of magnitude lower than the presence that stood before D, blocking his path.

D sent all that density right back at the presence.

I should have expected as much. You did well to resist it, a disembodied voice said disinterestedly. It wasn’t praise. This was something the meaning of which was beyond words. *Anyone else would have been crippled by this point, their psyche physically crushed. You certainly are a success.*

“Silence,” D said. He didn’t have to speak the words, nor even think them. This was a conversation of an altogether different kind. “What did you do here? What were the results of your experiments ten years ago?”

You mean the genes of darkness and light? Simply remarkable. How well you’ve done to fathom that much, the presence said, as it circled around D. *How cruel it is—that the genes of one person, even one solitary gene, can prove the deciding factor for its entire species. Crueler still when their race knew glories unrivaled by any other creature, yet gallantly accepted their fate in time. In that sense, couldn’t one say that the Nobility are truly superb?*

“So they’ve all quietly accepted their demise then?” D laughed scornfully. “If that was the case, there’d be no need for Vampire Hunters.”

It’s not the Nobility that needs them. It’s the humans. Why don’t you give us as much time as we need to die off?

“I’ve grown tired of listening to your quibbling. What were you doing here, tell me that.”

In place of an answer, a certain image appeared.

Light didn’t suddenly spring into being in the blackness. The

image wasn't projected into D's mind or his brain. Nonetheless, there was that one image.

It was the naked body of a woman.

Not just one. There were countless bodies, pale and nude, existing simultaneously in one simple image.

A black shadow bent over her. The shape of that silhouette alone blackly eclipsed parts of the woman's body. It looked like finger-shaped holds opened on her breasts, and the shadow's thick legs seemed to lop off her slick, writhing thighs.

The woman was reaching her peak. Her climax seemed to stretch on forever. Plunging her nails into the figure's back, she bit the flesh of its shoulder. The rapture on her face as she turned away became a voice spilling from her gleaming, wet lips.

However, an eternal climax might also mean eternal anguish.

A number of the faces were etched by death and faded away from the image. And more, so many more. D counted tens of millions.

The presence inquired, *Have you no memory of this? You of all people should remember it. It was the instant you came into this world. You were my only success*.

"You bastard—you were doing the same thing all over again here, weren't you?" D asked, resorting to normal words—words ablaze with white-hot rage—for the first time.

Exactly. You see, this was once a computational center for such things. Over the course of three-and-a-half millennia, I conducted countless experiments and all ended in failure. All the by-products were erased.

The scene changed.

D was surrounded by strange-looking creatures. Though clearly reminiscent of human beings, they were such weird creatures. Craniums swollen, limbs twisted, eyes glittering like those of a cat. Their whole bodies were mantled in fur. Infants cried feebly.

D realized each of them possessed an unimaginable strength. He saw their power. Every last one of them could operate night and day, without sleep. They could breathe in a vacuum, too. They could swim freely underwater, and their cells could regenerate from even fatal blows.

They were the pinnacle of biological evolution. However, a sole drawback brought death upon them.

The accursed deed—the need to drink blood.

That was the reason they were erased. Hundreds of thousands of them, still infants and unable to offer any protest, were buried in the darkness for all time.

"Why did you do all these things?" The strictly serene query

bore an infinite weight of grief.

In the pursuit of possibility. There were more ten years ago. But it all ended in failure.

"And do you intend to erase them, as you did all those young lives?"

It's not my habit to leave failures around, the presence said in conclusion. His final word on the matter was spoken with silence, but was all the more frightening for its import. *I shall dispose of all the genes of darkness. You can watch to make sure, if you wish. You've seen a great many things. A few more shouldn't pain you.*

While he *listened* to the presence, D half-closed his eyes. He was changing this being that possessed the density of infinitely compacted darkness into a form like his own.

That was his only chance of victory.

Of course, this was totally unrelated to the actual physical form of his opponent. D would only cut down the form made manifest to him—that was the extent of it. Somewhere within D, a gigantic, powerful figure was moving toward completion. An image of the Sacred Ancestor, wrapped in a black cape, a pair of fangs jutting from the vermilion lips chiseled into his pale skin.

The instant it was complete, D focused all of his physical and mental energy into the sword racing from its sheath.

Light cut the darkness.

With the sunlight of midday showering down on him, D thrust his blade into the ground and clung to it almost like a crutch as he got to his feet. The heavy shadow of fatigue clung to his beautiful countenance.

"Looks like he's taken off," he said, even his breath ragged. He was answered by a quavering voice.

"You scare the hell out of me. That you could wound *him* . . . your own . . . "

Without replying, D started to walk over to the gate where he'd tethered his horse.

"Where are we headed?"

"I don't know what the four of them have planned, but now at least I know their fate."

"Then let's get out of town. Wash your hands of it, D. You've got no connection to these people."

"Tomorrow, it's going to be decided whether or not one of them goes to the Capital. For that reason alone she made it through the winter. Through a winter that's lasted a decade."

"So what you're trying to say is you'd like to watch over her so that she doesn't know the truth right up till the very end? What a sentimental softy you are."

D didn't say a word as he lashed his horse.

The whip rebounded off her white back.

Sobs escaping through her grit teeth, Lina opened her eyes and fought off the sudden urge to faint.

Though her face and her fully exposed torso were both soaked with sweat, her body was quite cold.

When she opened her eyes, she saw before her a bunch of jeering men. A bloodstained Cuore lay on the stone floor.

Lina's wrists were bound together by a rough rope, and she hung from a pulley in the ceiling. There were a great many welts across her back. The men laughed and told her they were still going easy on her. Though there'd been a few pauses along the way, she'd been whipped for nearly twenty minutes so far. This wasn't about getting a confession out of her. This was all about Lina's pain—about them enjoying the agony their whip wrung from the girl's flesh.

The men had no questions of any sort for her. Before they brought Lina and Cuore to the interrogation chamber, located in one of the outbuildings at Fern's place, they'd asked things like where Fern and Bess were or what their connection was to the vampire attacks. But when Lina steadfastly maintained she didn't know, the men looked at each other, smiled, and started to torture the already half-dead Cuore. Perhaps trying to protect Lina as much as he could, Cuore held on through more than an hour of electric shocks and dunkings before he passed out.

"Hey, call the sheriff!"

Aware in her hazy, dim state of consciousness that this entreaty hadn't come from her, Lina let a smile rise on her lips. *What, is that the best they can do? Aside from the physical pain, this is nothing compared to what I've been through the last ten years.*

One of the men approached her. Judging by the unkempt beard, it had to be Corma. A powerful grip on her chin spun her around to face him .

"Oh, still got some fight in you, do you? We don't have to call no freaking sheriff, boys. We can handle this just fine. First of all, you ain't told us nothing yet."

"And I don't have anything to tell you, you fuzz-faced sadist! Don't touch me!"

While his grimy hands stroked her white breasts, Corma brought his vulgar lips close to Lina's face.

"Oh, you got a million things to spill. Like where's Fern at? And how the hell are you tied in to the Noble that's been running

wild in town lately? Well? If you ain't inclined to tell, we'll just have to get the answers from your body then."

A warm tongue traced the nape of her neck.

She tried to pull her face away from him, but he held her tightly by the chin.

"Hey, stop that! Let me go!"

"Getting a little feisty, are you?" Corma turned to the others "Hey! Give me a hand with her."

With nods and grunts of agreement, three or four more men gathered around her.

Hands and tongues wriggled against her back, across her belly, between her tightly shut legs.

"Stop it, just leave me alone!"

But as she squirmed, something was about to change deep inside Lina. She felt an anger unlike any emotion she'd known, a white blaze, directed more at the boundless depravity of human nature than at the outrages against her own body

These bastards—these damned humans!

Her pale body flew up. It was a fierce snap. The men, on her like a pack of hyenas ravaging a corpse, were smashed against the walls and floor.

The blaze raced into the blood vessels in her wrist. With the exertion of just a modicum of power, the coarse ropes burst and Lina fell to the ground.

"You . . . bitch!" Corma exclaimed, jumping back up from the floor.

He grabbed the iron club leaning against the wall. It was a vicious weapon, with sharp conical knobs protruding from all sides. In Corma's hands, it could knock through a stone wall, and, used against prey at close range, it hit harder than a slug from a high-caliber rifle.

The other men got up and surrounded Lina.

"No more mercy for you. Tear them bottom duds off, too, and then we'll fuck her to death."

"Heh heh. We'll stick it to her from the front and the rear!"

Vulgar promises and violent threats spewed from every mouth. They were just about to pound across the floor to her when—

The door opened with a dull creak.

All eyes turned that way, and while five pairs looked dubious, one pair widened in surprise and delight.

"Mr. Meyer!" Picking her clothes off the floor, Lina took cover behind the young teacher.

Not surprisingly, the men were trembling. They looked embarrassed, averting their gaze. Corma alone challenged the

teacher, and just barely at that. “What are you here for? Why all the way out here? I could’ve swore you was among the missing.”

“I went on a rather long journey,” the teacher said, as if wholly unsurprised by the strange circumstances. “I’ve just now gotten back to town. I merely dropped by with the intention of asking Fern what new developments there’d been in our local problem.”

“Fern ain’t here,” Corma spat, jabbing a finger at Lina. “Now he’s the one missing instead of you. The girl knows where he’s gone. So we was just interrogating her.”

“You don’t say?” Mr. Meyer said with a nod. Looking straight at Corma, he said, “Well, from the look of things, it doesn’t seem to have gone very well. Leave this to me. Let me try discussing this leisurely with her at my home. That’s fine with you, isn’t it?”

For some reason, Corma swallowed the “no” that was just about to leave his throat.

“Well then—begging your pardon.” With a simple bow, Mr. Meyer pushed Lina along and disappeared through the door.

Between the men who exchanged idiotic looks, spirits that contained equal amounts of relief and fear were rising.

Once the wagon had gone out through the gate, Mr. Meyer looked at Lina’s wrist and said, “Got a little rope burn, I see. That was just horrible of them. How did you get out of your bonds, anyway?”

“Uh, well . . . when I was fighting back, they came undone on their own.”

“You don’t say.”

The teacher asked nothing more, but gazed straight ahead. Growing somewhat anxious, Lina inquired, “Um . . . where are we going?”

“Where do you want to go? I’ll take you wherever you like. I’ve got today off, too.”

D’s face and the shack out by the waterwheel drifted into her mind, then Lina shook her head. Such precious memories. The girl knew there’d never be another day like that one.

“I want to go to school.”

“Good enough. But before that, Cuore needs some looking after, wouldn’t you say? Let’s take him to the doctor’s.”

He sounds kind of dejected, Lina thought. *Something troubling must’ve happened to him while he was gone.*

The wagon headed toward town.

When the members of the Vigilance Committee had gathered in the center of the compound, the horse bearing D galloped in.

With an impressive display of skill, the Hunter executed a dead stop about a yard shy of the men, who wore doltish expressions of astonishment. Not wasting any time, D said, “The girl must have been here. Where is she?”

“How the hell should we know?” Corma said, stepping to the fore. His voice brimmed with hostility. He’d just been thinking how they needed a little diversion. And now the perfect target had fallen right in their lap. “We was showing her a little bit of a good time,” he continued, “and she was sobbing and carrying on, but when we was done with her she sprouted wings and just flew right out the damn window. I reckon she’s at the school now.”

“The wagon tracks lead back here,” D said, in a strangely soft voice. Icy fingers of dread stroked up and down the spines of the ruffians. “How exactly were you showing her a good time?”

The gorgeous youth was standing in front of the men now, having dismounted without making a sound. A white sensation they couldn’t meet head-on buffeted their incipient faces. It was his eerie aura.

“What did you do to the girl? Answer me.”

Knowing D would not accept silence, Corma tried to bluff. “Heh. She just happened to be here when we came by. We tried to ask her a couple of questions about how she tied in to the Nobility, but the bitch wouldn’t play along. So then we took her inside and showed her a good time, naturally. Man, when we spread her legs and stuffed it in her, she was sobbing with joy. After that, we whipped her, and then all of us cleaned her wounds. Oh yeah, we cleaned them with our tongues!”

“Really?” D said with a nod, his voice not really soft but just low. Then, without another word, he turned his back and began to walk away.

“You freak!”

Carving a path through the air, the iron club swung in a downward arc aimed for D’s head.

The men’s gasp of surprise could be heard at the same time as the ring of iron meeting steel. At the base of D’s neck—or just a little bit above it—the iron club had halted, imbedded on the blade he’d partially unsheathed.

The men’s eyes bulged. More than the timing necessary to evade the skull-splitting attack of the club, more than anything, the men were shocked to see that D’s thin blade withstood the hundreds of pounds of pressure from the iron club.

But the real shock was yet to come.

Little by little, but without pause, D pulled the sword from its sheath. One-handed, of course. Behind him, the giant, who couldn't have been less than two hundred and twenty-five pounds, gripped his hundred-pound iron club with both hands, trying with every ounce of might in his body to stop the unsheathing of the blade.

For those unaccustomed to seeing such a display, it had to be the most frightening sight in the world.

When he'd finished pulling his sword free, D slowly turned around. Unwilling to let go, Corma slid one hand down to the far end of the club—now the man was poised with both arms bracing the club up over his head. Locked together, neither the sword nor the club trembled in the slightest.

Though they could see no twinge of movement in D's emotionless visage or the muscles of his beautiful, powerful hand, the men perceived the sinking of Corma's hulking frame, and they were paralyzed with fear and awe.

The sweat pouring from Corma soaked his beard. His knotty muscles shook, and he couldn't help sinking to his knees. His hulking form was forced down by a sword wielded single-handedly.

Without use of his trunklike legs, Corma had to rely on the strength of his two arms. When he turned his fearful eyes up at the foe standing over him, the boundless pressure was suddenly gone. *Okay*, he thought, *I was just getting warmed up, you dirty vamp bastard.*

However, in the next instant Corma lost himself in true horror.

D's blade was coming down now!

Realizing that the steel was slowly slicing through his iron club, Corma was an instant away from total panic when he heard D's voice.

"Where's the girl?" the gorgeous god of death inquired.

Despite his present situation, Corma found himself intoxicated by the voice and the beauty of the one who gazed at him. "Meyer came . . . took her away in the wagon. Took Cuore with them, too . . . "

D nodded, and then, with one slash, he split the iron club in half and Corma from skull to crotch.

Without so much as a glance at the body—sending out a bloody spray when it fell onto its back and split in two—D mounted his horse.

It wasn't until the pounding of iron-shod hooves striking the plain had faded into the distance that the men, standing vacant-eyed as if in a daydream, could finally breathe again.

At the point where it could slip out of the forest and be at the entrance to town, the wagon made a sudden stop. Lina, who'd been in the back assiduously tending to Cuore, leaned forward into the cab and cried out in surprise, "Mr. Meyer, what in the —?!"

Standing in the road about five yards ahead of them was the dreaded figure in gray.

"We've got to get out of here, Mr. Meyer!"

"It's no use. The horses won't budge."

"No problem. There's a stake gun in the storage compartment!" As she spoke, Lina returned to the bed and armed herself with a long, slim weapon she pulled out of the box. With propellant smeared on the butt of the stakes surrounding the two-inch-thick stock, and a small motorized lighter for rapid firing, the weapon's effectiveness tended to diminish over long distances. At close range, however, it demonstrated tremendous power.

"Stand back! This is nothing like the sliver gun I had last time!" Lina shouted, standing as tall and fierce as the temple guardians of yore.

The shadowy figure approached without a sound.

"Stay back! *I don't want to have to shoot you*!"

"Shoot it, Lina!"

The sound of Mr. Meyer's voice ever so slightly upset the power she put into her finger, which was already squeezing the trigger.

Leaving only a kick and a resounding bang in its wake, the stake pierced the shadowy figure's heart.

Turning its body ever so slightly, the figure reached its right hand around to its back. Lina shuddered as she watched the butt end of the stack sucked through the figure's body. Holding the bloody stake in his right hand, the figure leapt into the air.

He swung the stake down at Lina in the bed of the wagon. Rough wood slashed through the air.

Lina found herself standing in the road.

Without even giving her time to wonder how she had gotten from the wagon to the ground, the shadowy figure hurled the stake at her. Before she could scream, the wind-ripping growl abruptly stopped in front of her chest.

Lina gazed absentmindedly at the stake she'd caught as it flew through the air. Somehow it seemed like she'd become an altogether different creature.

"Don't you understand yet?" the shadowy figure asked her

from the bed of the wagon. “Your movements, your speed—you’re not the same old Lina any more.”

“You dolt, if you’re gonna start talking in your sleep, save it for nap time!” Effortlessly stopping the stake Lina threw back at him, the figure raised his right hand.

“D?!”

Seeing the gorgeous youth standing quietly off to the side, Lina was shocked.

“What’s wrong?” the figure asked. “Don’t you desire this man?”

As she heard the distant voice of the shadowy figure, Lina felt a sudden, hot, rapacious desire burning in her flesh.

I want D. I want those exquisite arms to hold me.

“That image is your very heart made manifest. It’d certainly never deny you what you wish. Love him any way you please.”

The low voice was pregnant with expectation. While she was aware this was a psychological attack, Lina touched her hand to D’s powerful, hard chest. His lovely lips panted.

D’s breath was sweetly fragrant.

I want to suck . . . Lina’s heart mumbled. *I want to suck . . .*

“I can’t!”

As soon as she’d desperately wrenched herself away, D became Mr. Meyer.

An enigmatic aroma wafted to her nose from the glass receptacle he cupped with both hands.

While averting her face from its color and scent, Lina heard another voice call out to her.

Drink. You must drink. It will set you free. Come back to me.

The container was proffered.

When it reached her mouth and the crimson liquid surged forward, Lina struck wildly at the cup with both hands. The glass shattered, and her field of view was stained deep red.

There was no one by her side. Her hands hadn’t been injured, either.

Lina started to run. She worked her legs without looking back. If she stopped, the shadowy figure would catch up to her. Worse yet, she’d be completely changed. That was her greatest fear.

The next thing she knew, she was at the edge of the forest.

She glimpsed the familiar school building. Though she got the feeling she shouldn’t go there, she had nowhere else to go.

“Lina,” the figure in gray called out, stopping the girl just as she was about to walk on.

She whirled around with a scream of terror, but, at the sight of a familiar face, her fear gave way to relief. Even if it was the most

disagreeable of people, in her present state Lina was simply glad it was one of her classmates.

"What are you doing out here?" Callis, who was evidently on his way to school, asked. A flirtatious smile arose on his smooth, handsome face.

"Nothing really. Run along to school now."

"That's some greeting. And after how long I waited to catch up to you."

"How long you waited?"

"Ever since the last time I saw you, you're all I've been thinking about. Look, I picked these for you yesterday."

A white bouquet was thrust before her.

The understated single flowers had been delivered on summer days and winter days, but this bouquet was one huge bunch, ripped up roots and all.

Lina remembered her window sill in the morning—the slight fluttering of her heart as she opened the window, thinking maybe today he hadn't come. The white flower she hugged gently to herself, knowing that someone was looking out for her. All these things were a million miles away.

Taking the bouquet, she heard a voice that was not her own say, "Uh, Callis, I have a favor to ask."

"What is it?"

"As I recall, your family processes beast carcasses, right? Don't you have a warehouse around here somewhere?"

"That's right." Even as he knit his brow in suspicion, the lustful laughter that arose in his thin eyes didn't escape Lina's notice. Not that it mattered.

"Take me there. I want you to hide me for a while. On account of my father's always doing these gross things to me."

"Wow, I had no idea." The young rake swallowed loudly, affected by Lina's physical presence. She seemed like a completely different person from the one he'd seen two days earlier. "Sure thing. It's not like they use it at all during the winter anyway. You wanna go right now, or after school?"

Lina turned toward the schoolhouse. Several students looked at them before disappearing through the gates. She got the feeling Viska and Marco were among them. Someone waved to her, and Lina lifted her hand a little in a half-hearted response. Almost as if to say goodbye.

Then, her decision made, she took Callis's hand.

Lips that seemed visibly redder said, "Okay, let's go."

About the same time the girl and the bewitched boy disappeared into the depths of the forest, D arrived at the school. The wagon tracks that he had followed all the way from Fern's place through the forest had come to a sudden end. Finding some signs of a struggle on the ground, he'd rushed to the schoolyard.

He entered the sole academic building. The high school classroom was the one closest to the gate.

Without knocking, he opened the rickety door. Instantly, countless eyes focused on him.

"Well, do come in. I haven't seen you for a while." Chalk in one hand, Mr. Meyer bowed a greeting.

At someone's command of "stand for our guest," the students rose in unison. "Bow." Each head dropped simultaneously, without the slightest flaw in timing, then came back up again. Every one of them had Lina's face.

No one told them to take their seats again.

D's pupils emitted a weird and beautiful light.

A psychological attack. And I walked right into it. Reprimanding himself lightly, D tried to focus his senses on the source of the force field covering the area, but couldn't find it. Perhaps having learned a lesson from the failure of the attack on the rainy night, the enemy was concealing its position by using diversions on a multitude of levels.

It's not that the field couldn't be penetrated by a concerted mental effort, but the effort itself would consume a great deal of time and psychic energy.

"Are you here to observe the class?" asked the Lina holding the chalk.

A forced smile skimmed D's lips. Somewhere in that gelid psyche, capable of freezing all thought, there might have been a trace of the innocent lass after all.

Linas beyond number approached him. In their right hands, each held a rough wooden stake. Surrounding D, they swung their stakes in unison. D tried to leap away, but his feet were stuck to the floor, and a number of stakes drove into his chest, spraying blood everywhere.

In extreme pain, but without changing expression in the slightest, D leapt to the corner of the classroom. Since he'd weathered that first attack, much of the efficacy of his opponent's spell had been lost.

That's not to say there were really stakes stuck in D's body. This whole battle was taking place within D's mind. If his body—which was equivalent to his will—were to surrender, the real D could die without a single physical wound. Conversely, if he could

hold out, the result would be a trenchant blade to turn against his assailant. It was a quiet battle.

Lina, Lina, and Lina hurled their stakes. Two were deflected, but the last one stuck in his shoulder.

With especially long pickets clutched at their waists, Lina and Lina rushed in. D drew his longsword and hacked through both of their necks.

The blade met no resistance, and the two pickets sank into his abdomen. Letting go of the pickets, Lina and Lina laughed sweetly.

D gazed at the blade of his sword. It was just an ordinary tree branch. Even if on the surface his consciousness was ordering him to butcher her, his subconscious was trying to save "Lina."

Swiftly growing ever more enervated by massive blood loss and scorching heat, D grinned bitterly.

Lina leapt, swinging a stake down at him from over her head. His left hand caught her by the wrist, and he threw her back into the midst of the net of attackers closing on him. Though his pain had increased, mobility was returning to his body. His opponent was growing weaker as well.

Suddenly, there was a change in the world.

D stood on a section of ice field crossed only by the howling wind.

He didn't have a mark on him. The sword in his right hand had returned to being his peerless weapon.

D shut the door more firmly than ever on the cage of his psyche.

His foe was gambling his victory on this image. They'd make every lethal effort to leave a beautiful corpse lying there, exposed to the wind on the fields of ice.

Shooting stars flew across the pitch-black sky.

D, someone called out to him. The voice twisted in the wind, became a desolate scream, and raced off across the icy plains. Again it cried, *D*.

Ahead of him at a distance that was impossible to judge—it might as easily have been a yard as a thousand miles—there stood a lone woman.

The long garment of pure white she wore wasn't a dress, but rather a shroud. He couldn't see her face, hidden as it was by her black hair. Much like D, she had nearly translucent skin.

D.

It seemed to be both a voice issuing from the woman, as well as the song of the wind.

D stood completely still, as if frozen solid.

From what part of D did his opponent pull such an image? Truly, the vastly spreading plains of nothingness were a world befitting this youth. On the other hand, the woman . . .

D, we meet at long last. The voice was like the wind sweeping the fields of ice. *How I've waited . . . with just one thing I've been wanting to ask.*

D's whole body tensed.

Whatever question she asked, to grant that request would mean death for his psyche. His enemy's trap was perfect.

I want to know the name of your father.

And so the question came. The question to which this woman knew the answer better than anyone else.

For the first time, a dark shadow resided in D's serene beauty. The wind became even more insistent, and, as D grew ever colder, the icy plains dyed his shadow even darker.

Please answer me, D. What's your father's name? What is it? What is his name?

D's lips parted ever so slightly. The tiny tremble in his cheek testified to the intensity of the battle of wills he was now engaged in.

What's his name? What's your father's name?

The wind frayed the edges of his exceedingly grave words.

"His name . . . is . . . Dra—"

The fields of ice were buried by white light.

D had just opened the door to the classroom.

With chalk in hand, the middle-aged teacher turned a dumbfounded expression to him, and all the students were left breathless.

He had triumphed over the psychological attack.

"Is there something we can do for you?" the teacher, the substitute for Mr. Meyer, inquired.

"You haven't seen Lina, have you?" D asked, moving his eyes from the teacher to the students. The fields of ice, the woman, and her question were already far behind him. He was a Hunter, after all.

There was no answer. Unable to turn away, the girls trained their gazes on D's countenance, and even the cheeks of the boys stained with bashfulness. They had to wonder if such beauty could actually exist.

"The girl's in serious danger. Not just her life, but her soul is in peril. If anyone knows anything, please tell me."

A scrawny figure—the boy Marco—stood up over by the windows and told him where to go. D raced from the room.

By the time D reached Callis's processing plant, however, only the boy's body was there, lying on the floor with its throat torn out. Yet, not a drop of blood remained anywhere, and Lina was gone without a trace.

The dozen riders climbing the hill on horseback turned at the sound of hoofbeats coming up behind them. The riders were the mayor and the sheriff, accompanied by the members of the Vigilance Committee.

"Where are you headed?" D asked, leaving about fifteen feet between himself and them.

The sheriff came forward. He pointed to the silver cylinder strapped to the back of his horse. A proton bomb. "We're gonna take care of those ruins. That way, the sight of them won't upset the folks from the exam board. We found out from some kids who were picking flowers out here that anyone can climb it normally now."

"Perfect timing," the mayor shrieked, his mouth spreading across the better part of his face. "When we were done with this, we'd planned on coming around to arrest you. On suspicion of murdering Corma. Then we were going to grill you about where Lina is."

When D's gaze fell upon them, several of those who'd been there when Corma was cut in two grew pale.

"I hate to tell you this, but that doesn't constitute a crime," the sheriff said, turning to the mayor. "According to the others' testimony, Corma attacked him from behind. That being the case, no matter how he got killed, he brought it on himself. We've got nothing to ask this Hunter except for information about Lina."

The mayor bit his lip. Looking at D with a cheerful expression, the sheriff continued, "They told me the truth even after they saw one of their own killed right before their very eyes. It looks to me like they're really, truly scared of you. Honestly, the thought of it leaves me speechless. Fact of the matter is, I'd love it if you could show me the technique you used."

Noticing how strange the atmosphere had become, the mayor shrieked, “What are you doing shooting the shit with him? At the very least, he must know where Lina is. Take him in before he gets away.”

“If he was gonna run, I reckon he’d have left town when you fired him,” the sheriff said in a forceful tone. “But he stayed. I don’t know why. And he risked his life to protect Lina when she jumped into that mess half-cocked. Tell me, mister Mayor—you think any of us would feel like fighting for a girl who was a complete stranger with a couple of them guard beasts coming at him? A man like that won’t run or hide, even in the face of certain death. There’s no need to take him in.”

The mayor fell silent, his face flushed vermilion.

“I know it might sound overly cautious, but it’d be wise not to meddle with the ruins,” D said softly. “Since the way up the hill has returned to normal, it’s only proper to assume there’s some other kind of defenses now. That castle did belong to the Nobility.”

“We’re not leaving anything to chance.” Shading his eyes with his right hand, the sheriff turned his gaze to the rear of the hill.

D had already perceived the low rumbling sound.

He saw a black gun barrel spearing the sky.

Sunbeams scattered off its gigantic metallic body, displaying an overwhelming mass. The flat body of the vehicle was treated with a special coating resistant to lasers and other light-beam weaponry. Only the radar dish and caterpillar treads were vestiges of ancient times.

“It’s a M-8026 CT—a computerized tank,” the sheriff said in a hearty tone. “We dug it out a couple of years back after someone found it buried in the ground on the edge of town. Called a mechanic in all the way from the Capital to give it a tune-up. Thanks to this baby, our losses to bandits and colossal beasts in the three years since have been nil, but the village is still as poor as ever. This model is over two thousand years old, but it still had the manual, and it gets the job done. Seems to have been abandoned for some reason or other. Anyway, you can see we got backup in spades.”

D didn’t say a word as he turned his horse toward the foot of the hill. Not mentioning that the shadowy gray figure might be lurking deep within the ruins, or that there was a definite possibility it had made off with Lina, he went down the hill silently.

“Once we’ve taken care of business here, we’ll be paying a visit to your little hut out by the waterwheel,” the sheriff yelled after

him. He and the other inhabitants of the village continued to believe that the Noble was dead. “I’d appreciate it if you could manage to find out where Lina’s at by then.”

What the sheriff must have meant was that if the Hunter handed her over instead of hiding her, things could be settled peacefully.

D didn’t turn around again.

“All right, move out,” the mayor commanded. “Okay, Sheriff, let’s give it a blast, just to set the mood!”

The sheriff smiled wryly and gave the command to fire.

Raising the 150-millimeter-caliber barrel of the laser cannon, the tank took aim at the outline of the ruins without a single wasted motion. There wasn’t even the sound of gears grinding together.

The thick beam of light caused a white-hot globe of light to erupt on the castle wall. That scorching sphere of some ten million degrees made the stone wall evaporate nearly instantaneously, and it glittered like a rainbow as the sunlight rained down on it.

The men gave a cheer.

“Now, move in!” the mayor cried.

The hill responded.

Abruptly, the tank turned. Taking a blast from a weapon mounted on the howling ceramic turret, some of the men and mounts had their heads pulverized like ripe persimmons.

“Fall back! Retreat to the base of the hill!” The sheriff’s voice was blotted out by shock.

Meanwhile, the enormous form of the tank was being sucked into the ground. It was like the sinking of a gigantic ship bound in a whirlpool of earth and green, a vision beyond imagining.

The creak of grinding metal rose from the earth, and when the barrel alone was left poking skyward, a terrific shock rocked the hill. The energy of the ultracompact atomic reactor became lotus-red as flames spouted into the sky, staining the world crimson.

“The hill swallowed it then?” D muttered softly, watching from a distance as the group of men and horses scurried down the hill, rolling and stumbling. Now that way into the ruins had been cut off, too.

D returned to the shack by the waterwheel.

Watering his horse at the brook, he retrieved a silver cup and a bottle full of tiny capsules from his bags. He scooped up some crystal-clear water and dropped in a capsule.

In a matter of seconds, the water became the color of blood. Downing it in one gulp, he drew an easy breath.

The capsules, filled with dried blood, plasma, and nutrients,

were food for dhampirs. Ordinary dhampirs took them three times a day. However, this was the first D had taken since coming to the village. His stamina far exceeded the bounds of the average dhampir.

The sky started to turn a darker blue.

Would dawn come again for a certain girl?

D set his cup down by the window and headed over to his horse. Even if his efforts were in vain, he still couldn't give up.

Why did he go through it time and again, all the deaths and wasted effort? Straddling his horse, he started once more retracing the path to the ruins. He galloped for a few minutes, then, suddenly, he stopped.

A lone youth stood by the side of the road. It was Cuore.

In an instant, he'd vanished.

Dismounting and moving closer, D spied the small hole concealed in the thicket. It was the same hole where Lina had her encounter with the ash-gray shadow.

It was probably a trap. Without the slightest pause, D threw himself in.

A strange sensation prickled his body. That could only mean one thing—a spatial distortion. Two points were connected, warping the space and distance between them. Those two points were probably the hole . . . and the ruins.

There was dirt beneath his feet. Less than a foot away was someplace with an expansive floor paved in stone. This was probably one of the ruin's emergency exits. Either all the circuits blown when D broke free from the sealed dimension had been repaired, or power had been restored to this area alone.

D picked up a pebble by his foot and pitched it forward. At the boundary line between the dirt floor and the paving stones, the pebble gave off a pale flash of light and fell on the other side. The shape was exactly the same, but the pebble's substance was different.

"So it's *dead*? Looks like I'll have to pass a compatibility test."

There was a powerful guard on duty here. Anyone or anything failing to match the predefined physical criteria of the spatial rift would meet a silent material death.

Perhaps D would be transformed into diamond?

Without taking time to think, he stepped silently forward.

Every one of his cells emitted the sparkle of jewels, and dreamy flames colored his countenance.

As soon as he set foot on the stone floor, the glow flickered and faded away.

With just a light toss of his head, D ventured into the depths of

the darkness.

A foul stench and presences condensed around him. D's eyes could clearly discern the vastness of this area, and the form of those who dwelled here—twisted, transfigured, *former* human beings.

The wind whistled, and two of them that'd leapt at him fell to the ground decapitated. An evil, malicious intent poured unbridled from the bloodshot eyes at D, making the darkness seethe. These creature delighted in slaughter and hatred. What could they possibly have been granted in return?

A few more lost their lives, too, and then the strange things receded into the depths of the darkness. The iron door set in the far wall started to shut, swallowing their footfalls.

D became a black wind, slipping through the thin opening.

He came into a shining corridor. Some sort of luminescent material must have been mixed into the silicon steel of the walls and ceiling. The floor, which hadn't deteriorated over the millennia, hazily reflected his form.

Following the sounds of the twisted creatures, D proceeded down a long corridor. In the distance, the groan of machinery was audible.

These were the remnants of a dream. But whose, and what had they dreamt of?

The scenery changed, and D's way was obstructed by a wall of cyclopean rocks. Crumbling stone steps stretched into the darkness above. Once he'd climbed them all, a steel door came into view.

The blue pendant on D's chest grew more brilliant, and the door opened without a sound.

The vast chamber was filled by an almost twilight illumination. It was a laboratory reminiscent of the one he'd explored with Lina. But this one looked several times larger. The memory of any number of castles he'd seen before came and went in D's mind. Indeed, they'd been filled with blue light, too. Perhaps that was the color of extinction?

On the stone floor, two naked bodies were intertwined.

With every movement of the gray shadow lying on the pale female body, a low pant escaped. Her white hands raked fingernails down the ash-gray cloth, and her thighs tightened around his waist.

The face of that beautiful woman, who looked like she was being violated by a mummy of antiquity, was the face of Lina.

Unexpectedly opening the eyelids that rapture had nailed shut, her eyes met D's. Her expression faded.

The gray shadow leapt up without even stirring the air. The blade of his sword drank in the blue light.

Simultaneously, there rose the whine of sword leaving sheath from D's back.

"I see . . . Cuore's to blame, isn't he?" Making a voice of his anger, the shadow squeezed out the words. "It was unwise of me to leave him unattended like that, even if all his psychic energy was spent and he was more dead than alive. But you're too late, Hunter. My wish has been fulfilled. Do you have it in you to cut down Lina?"

Narrowing his gaze to take in just the ash-gray shadow, who was brimming with murderous intent. and Lina, who had lethargically raised her sweaty torso, D analyzed the situation. "So this is the birth of a new Nobility? What would you do if I could cut her down?"

The shadowy figure slowly lowered his blade until it scraped along the floor. "Could you do it? Could you really cut down a friend?"

Flashes of white light crossed.

The shadow closed on him with unbelievable speed, slashing his demonic blade from ground to sky, but D's longsword deflected the blow and split the suddenly unbalanced figure's shoulder.

The deep red wound yawned wide, and vivid blood flew—but the gash closed quickly.

A look of admiration raced through D's pupils. No matter how powerful their vaunted recuperative abilities may be, none among the Nobility had taken a hit from D and been unaffected.

As the shadow backed away, he brushed the lab table beside him. Made of oak, the table looked to be about ten feet long. Moving his left hand slightly, the shadow sent the table flying at D. It roared with the force behind it.

The instant it appeared to impact on D's body, the table changed direction, went over his head, and fell to the floor behind him.

Realizing that D had flipped it with the tip of his longsword, the shadow was rooted to the spot.

This was a showdown between things that had the shape of men, but weren't men.

D leapt into the air.

The shadow seemed to have forgotten to move, and his heart was pierced by a naked blade that poked clear through his back.

Lina gasped with astonishment.

The moment the two figures had overlapped, one of them had

leapt backwards—with a sword still stuck through his body. Behind his mask, a sneering grin rose in his bloodshot eyes.

A vampire invincible to even D's sword through the heart! Yes, surely this must be proof that the demon who could walk in the light of day didn't have to resign himself to the destiny of the night.

There was a silvery flash of light right in front of the now empty-handed D, and the Hunter soared through the air like the shadow had. As he closed in after him, the ash-gray shadow swung his left hand.

A metal cylinder struck the floor, sending pillars of flame up toward D.

Fending off the flames born of the ultracompact atomic grenade with the hem of his coat, D came to a halt. Behind him was a stone wall.

He could see the shadowy figure smiling through his mask.

What froze his grin was that the arm that had shielded D's chest seconds before had halted his deadly sword thrust with its palm.

As the terror-struck shadow watched, the face that arose in D's palm laughed heartily. The tip of his sword was held in that wicked little mouth. Clearly someone had bitten off more than they could chew.

Perhaps the ashen figure's shock was too great, or perhaps he couldn't match the strength of that uncanny mouth, but, for whatever reason, the shadow let go of his longsword and jumped out of the way. He was trying to extract the sword that was still stuck through his chest when the crunch of severed vertebrae came from around his neck.

This time, blood spouted out like a fountain, and, without even watching the decapitated torso drop, D approached the ash-gray head rolling around on the floor.

The impact after its flight through the air had knocked the mask off, and the face of what was still a young man glared at the heavens. The right half of the face looked like it had been caught in a press, with both the eye and the ear shrunken to half their normal size. Ugly and grotesque, the face was completely covered with wrinkles.

"Such is the price of receiving powers none of the Nobility have ever known!" Lina said from beside D. It was unclear where she'd got it from, but she now wore a white death shroud—raiment that until a day earlier would have been the furthest thing from appropriate attire for her. "In return for the amplification of his psychic energy, Cuore's cognitive powers degenerated. I see it

all now. That was Tajeel Schmika.”

“Is Mr. Meyer okay?” D asked, attentive to his surroundings but without taking up his sword. Perhaps he was getting ready for the other one, the unrecognized vampire rendered on the computer screen.

Lina happened to smile then. “You’ll see him soon enough. Do you want to know the whole truth? I think you already know most of it anyway.”

D gazed at Lina, at the girl of seventeen whose whole body brimmed with energy, who perhaps wanted to stun the Hunter with a sight of her supple thighs peeking through the slit of her death shroud.

“Then all this is the result of experiments a decade ago? And now all of it’s coming to light.”

Lina nodded at his serene tone. Casting a sympathetic glance at the creatures in the corner of the room, their eyes glittering, she said, “They were children taken from other villages about the same time we were. In their present form, they’ve gone a decade without food or drink—yes, they could live that way forever. I wonder if we could say they benefited in some way? What do you think? I guess you could say that compared to them, we were lucky. The experiments left us with no external abnormalities, so at least we got to live the last ten years as normal human beings. Without even realizing we’d died a decade earlier . . . ”

With a brief glance at Tajeel’s head and body, which gave off a purplish smoke as they dissolved, D moved his eyes to the enormous electronic apparatus hemming the laboratory.

Remnants of the abominable experiments that had once been performed here, gene-altering equipment, automated surgical units, clusters of ultralarge-scale integrated circuits—all these listened without a word as the tragic truth reached them.

“Why was Tajeel left here?”

“He was a failure, after all. Right from the very end of the experiments he was wild, with an excessive lust for blood. That’s why only the three of us were released. Given a grace period of ten years. It seems we were the best of the guinea pigs.”

Ten years—a long, long time until the results of the experiments would become clear. During that time, the modifications made to their cells caused the cells to change one by one, mixing a different hue into the blood flowing through their veins, and making their genes long for the darkness . . .

“I suppose you could say the experiments, including the ones to increase my intelligence, succeeded for the most part. Now I can see perfectly well in the dark, and the cells of my body produce energy even if I don’t eat anything. Though I haven’t

tried it, I suppose I could even survive in a vacuum or underwater. D, can you do all that?"

Without waiting for an answer, Lina took the sword D had discarded from atop Tajeel's remains. Thrusting it deep into her own heart, she let him watch as she pulled it out again.

"So long as we don't get our heads cut off, we're immortal. Tajeel knew that, so he brought me into the fold, and I fulfilled his desire. As I'm sure you could see. I wonder if my child will be a good one?"

"Why did he wait until now to make you his? He must've had countless opportunities."

"Because, as the only one who had awakened, there was nothing he could do until our genes of darkness were perfected. All he had to do was wait. I would automatically learn the truth about everything and gladly let him have his way with me. So that we might increase our numbers."

So, was that the real purpose of the ruins?

"But it seems the experiment failed after all. The same urge that Tajeel had dwells in me, as well."

Within her slightly opened mouth, D saw a pair of fangs.

The girl frolicking on a road crusted with remnants of snow because she was going to the Capital.

The girl at the windowsill, a white blossom at her breast, gazing for an eternity at the road that had carried her mysterious suitor away.

"I don't know if you found him or not, but before I came here I killed one of my classmates. Once we were alone, he suddenly grabbed hold of me, pushed me down, and demanded that I transfer my right to go to the Capital to him. He said that was the only reason he'd ever pretended to be interested in a Noble victim like me. At that point, something inside me changed forever. I wonder if that makes his murder justified?"

D was silent, just listening. There was nothing else he had to do. What had he fought for in this village anyway?

"And do you have the same urge, too?" Oh, but the Hunter's voice was as cold and clear as ever when he sent the question back over his shoulder.

"Yes." Cuore stood paralyzed in the blue light. He had an intelligent, rational expression that seemed to belong to someone else entirely—and he had pearly white fangs.

"He tried to protect me right up to the very end. Even knowing the fate in store for him, he did his very best, asked them not to bring me into the fold. Though he was the one who found the entrance in the forest and set Tajeel free in the first place, the

night Tajeel attacked Kaiser's wife for the second time, he was sneaking around after him trying to stop him. Unfortunately, he hadn't mastered the use of his psychic energy, and he let it all out at our place."

Letting a chagrined smile arise, Cuore came over and stood by Lina's side. Twining her pale arms around his neck, Lina smiled lasciviously.

"I intend to let him have his way with me, too. What'll you do, D—try to cut me down? Aren't you supposed to be a Hunter?"

"I don't work without compensation. Besides, my business here is done." That was his farewell to the girl who'd listened to the song of wind and the brook with him.

D spun on his heel in the blue light. He made it as far as the door before a voice filled with positively unearthly malice drifted from a dark corner.

"Why . . . are you letting him leave?"

D saw the ash-gray shadow walking closer with a laser gun in his right hand. The last one—the man the computer had rendered.

"Stop it," Lina said in a strident tone. "Killing him will accomplish nothing. We can live anywhere at all. Given time, we can probably discover some way to get by without lusting for blood."

The shadowy figure shook his head. It was an oddly sluggish movement. "We haven't been *given time* . . . Take a good look."

One of his hands tore off the mask.

There were gasps of surprise.

What made Lina and Cuore's eyes bulge wasn't the fact that the face belonged to Mr. Meyer, of course, but rather that the face itself was warped and melting like a waxwork. One eye drooped all the way to his chin, trailing red tendons behind it.

D's memory replayed a certain phrase. *I must dispose of the failures.*

"You don't . . . seem surprised," Mr. Meyer said. "You knew after all, didn't you?"

D nodded. "When that farmhouse was attacked by a couple of creatures that escaped from here, there wasn't enough blood to account for you. There could only be one reason. Because you were one of them." His voice seemed pained. The man who'd let a light shine on the future of a girl. These, too, were words of farewell. "Apparently your vampire nature seems to have awakened without you being aware of it. Are you the one who attacked Fern and his daughter? That'd explain why, when the two blood samples from two different attackers were mixed together and analyzed, an unrecognizable face was displayed."

A sapphire beam converted the floor by D's feet to steam and ions. D didn't so much as flinch.

"Why are you the only one who's fine? Weren't we . . . humans made in the same fashion? How come we're the only ones . . . who must die? . . . "

There was a sound like something shattering, and the teacher collapsed on the floor.

"Mr. Meyer!"

"Keep away from me . . . " Checking Lina before she could run over to him, the teacher tried to stand again.

Blue light speared through the twilight, burning through the walls and floor in succession.

The barrel of the weapon dropped.

A voice saddled with infinite anger and protest crept across the ground. "Lina . . . You mustn't . . . study . . . the history of the Nobility . . . "

Watching the putrid ichor and clothing fall to a heap on the floor, Lina asked D, "Is that our fate?"

D was silent. He heard a voice. *You were my only success.*

"I envy you."

How must Lina's words have sounded to D?

"I'm so jealous of you, I could hate you. When will we end up like that, do you know?"

"No, I don't."

Absentmindedly, Lina wound her arm around the neck of the frozen Cuore and said, "I'd planned on just dropping out of the picture, but I'm going to go before the exam board tomorrow. You'll come, too, won't you? True to Mr. Meyer's dying wish, I've got to tell them how much I loathe the Nobility. To say there's no tomorrow for them, and no history—just like the four of us."

Suddenly, Cuore stepped away from Lina.

Speechless with surprise, Lina was ready to go right after him, but D caught her by the arm.

"He doesn't want you to see him."

Tottering, the youth disappeared into the reaches of the darkness. The time had come for him, too.

In the blue light that would most likely fill this place for all eternity, the beautiful Hunter and the girl trained their eyes on the depths of the darkness as they both, individually, bore witness to the cruelty of fate.

The next day, the trio of examiners who arrived in the village early in the afternoon received a strange proposal from the mayor,

who looked somewhat pale. He said that the town wanted to conduct the exam in the ruins that'd once belonged to the Nobility.

The selection of a human being who would help build the future would take place in the ruins of those that had ruled the past. Wouldn't that be thrilling?

The proposal was accepted. That evening saw many in attendance in a subterranean hall filled with chairs.

Although the members of the exam board furrowed their brows as Lina stood in her white dress in front of mysterious devices, after a captivating smile from her they took their seats without complaint. The villagers lined up behind them.

Only one person, the mayor, wore an expression of discontent, and that was because D and Lina had coerced him into using this location. If his relationship with his adopted daughter was made public before the exam board, he'd have been run out of town, regardless of the power that he held. But, more than that, more than anything, it was the eerie aura from D as the Hunter stared at him that made the mayor tremble.

D stood quietly behind Lina, hidden in the depths of the darkness.

When everyone had gone to their seats, Lina bowed quietly, and the mayor stood up. "This year's representative of the village of Tepes: Lina Belan. Her score on the selection tests—twelve hundred out of a possible twelve hundred points. Her excellent work has earned her a place before this exam board."

Though they tried their level best to preserve their stern demeanor, the expressions of the examiners softened. Despite the fact that the results had been communicated ahead of time, Lina's performance still had the power to inspire awe.

"Very well. Now, there's just one question I must ask before the final decision is made. What studies do you intend to pursue in the Capital?"

A wave of tension passed through the assembly.

Many of her classmates knew of the girl's desire. However, to say it aloud would be to throw away all her tomorrows. But they didn't know that for Lina there was no tomorrow.

As D stood there, he had a fleeting shade of sorrow in his eyes.

"Before I answer, there's something I'd like to show you."

The assembly stirred at Lina's comment. Such a proposal was out of the norm. This examination, which could have been concluded with a brief answer, was becoming a long, drawn-out affair.

"Once, this castle was referred to as the Nobility's Frontier

Center for Calculation," Lina began. "Constructed about five thousand years ago—well, five thousand, one hundred and twenty-seven years ago, to be exact—certain top-secret experiments were conducted here. Five thousand years—isn't there something familiar about that number? From the historical point of view, it's generally said that the decline of the Nobility as a race began in this era."

The blue light stirred. What was the girl trying to tell them?

Lina raised her right hand.

Between the girl and the audience, an image formed. While it was completely two-dimensional, it had depth and color. Realizing that the image was of the same subterranean hall they were now in, the people looked at one another.

Machinery ensconced in the darkness glittered, shadowy people dashed about, flasks spouted gouts of prismatic smoke. Children were sealed in medical casings on what looked to be lab tables, and men in black garb studied data rendered in strangely glowing points of light.

"This is a recording of the experiments," Lina explained. "Experiments by the Nobility that were no less than an attempt to halt the decline of their species. However, their science had already come to the conclusion that their decline was inevitable. To them, this unavoidable decline also meant eventual extinction. How the few who reached that conclusion must have cursed their fate, perhaps even wallowed in the deepest despair, I can well imagine."

Here, Lina smiled broadly.

"Gives you a warm, fuzzy feeling, doesn't it?"

The assembly stirred a bit, the tension broken. The examiners exchanged glances and laughed. Still beaming her smile, Lina continued. "The way they chose to combat their despair was through these experiments. If the inevitability of their ruin was written in their genes like letters carved into a milestone, then they had only to make those genes into something else. Turn night into day, darkness into light. Become a creature with a far greater will to survive as a race—a higher potential energy. In this way, they began trying to genetically combine humans with the Nobility."

It took a few seconds before all assembled there could catch the import of Lina's words.

This time, shock waves ran through the assembly. The mayor and one of the examiners rose to their feet.

"How—how do you know that? What are you?"

As if to answer the examiner's question, the image hanging in

space changed.

Warped children were born one after another, men and women transformed into something no longer human. A part of the ruins was suddenly consumed by flames, crumbling.

"These experiments were carried out secretly in one area of the Frontier, far from the Capital, and you can easily imagine what the results would have meant to many of the Nobility. Just as we find it repulsive to even consider such a thing, they, too, detested the thought of mixing with humans. Let's say that the destruction by the opposing faction you just witnessed was one answer. Those privy to the secret fled from the ruins, and silence reigned here for five thousand years."

About to say something, the examiner saw a look rising in the girl's eyes. He held his tongue. Such a mysterious look it was. When hatred and sorrow are mixed together, could they produce a picture of supreme bliss?

"Ten years ago, the ruins came back to life. A being of tremendous importance, one whom even I find difficult to comprehend, took four children from our village and performed the same procedures on us. Why at this late date? And why were those children chosen? That I don't know. Perhaps the decline of their race had highs and lows, like a biorhythm, and there was an optimal time for starting up again. At any rate, the children underwent the treatment, and were then returned to the village. All memories erased, unaware that the results would manifest in their bodies a decade later. And now the results are in. Taking this shape . . . "

The eyes of people focused on Lina—on the pair of fangs poking from the corners of her lips.

There was no more stirring of the crowd. A deathly silence fell over them, and the mayor covered his face with both hands.

Erasing the image with a slight wave of her right hand, Lina continued softly. "Yes, but now it's all over. The four children, in accordance with fate, will leave the village. Even if that fate was forced on them by someone else."

At this point, Lina turned her back to the audience, as if to let someone standing in the darkness hear her last malediction. "There's no need to mourn for them any longer," the girl said, "because now they finally understand. What was hoped for them. What's waiting for them where they must go. And though in the long run they themselves didn't quite get to the top, they were one step in what will continue to be a very, very long climb.

"The Nobility perished, and the human race remains," Lina continued. "However, couldn't we say the biological disposition of

human beings—in both their physiology and psychology—is superior to that of the Nobility? Who could claim that the worth of a creature is based on the height of the biorhythm for its species? Brutality and cruelty on par with the Nobility, an urge to destroy anything more beautiful than yourself—these things have been all too familiar to me."

Transfixed by those freezing cold pupils, the mayor grew pale.

Once again, an image hove into view.

The people saw stars glittering in a pitch-black ocean. In the distance, a hundred billion more stars sparkled, a vast spiraling nebula nurturing a multitude of life-forms, the sea of hydrogen atoms giving birth to existence itself.

"The four children were supposed to go there."

Lina's voice sounded as if it had crossed a great distance when it rang in the ears of those assembled in the rows.

"Free from the black destiny hanging over the humans and Nobility, they were to go out and join the universal consciousness as a perfect form of 'intelligent' life. Now even that dream is gone, but because of that, I suppose they don't mourn for themselves."

Suddenly, the image changed.

The darkness faded rapidly, and light filled the hall. The white light welling up drove away the twilight, swathing the exhausted-looking faces of the people, and every inch of their bodies, in a wonderful and serene hue.

"This is the potential of the new humanity."

Her whole body glittering beautifully, Lina quietly looked at D, then gazed at the shining people.

"The *people* who uncovered this potential, the *beings* who guided the human race to a higher level—were they really so cursed?"

The girl suddenly pressed a hand to her chest. The time had come. If nothing else, her voice was proud.

"I believe I'd like to learn about the history of the Nobility."

As soon as she finished saying the words, Lina collapsed.

"Don't come near me! Don't watch! D!"

The people stopped where they were, and the beautiful shadow knelt by Lina's side.

"Just hide my face . . . "

A black scarf fell across the face of the girl.

"Thank you . . . D . . . Stay by my side, won't you? I'm so scared . . . "

"I'll always be here."

“Back at the shack . . . ” Lina wrung a voice from her pain. “At the shack . . . the white flower I found in the morning . . . that . . . was your doing, wasn’t it? If someone had left it, there’s no way . . . you wouldn’t have noticed them . . . ”

“That’s right.”

“I was so glad . . . so very . . . glad . . . There were two people who cared about me . . . I wish I could’ve met the other one . . . ”

“Don’t talk.”

Lina’s hand came up. Just before it started to melt and dissolve, D took hold of it gently. It was the first time he’d done so. It would never happen again.

“Goodbye . . . D. Oh, the potential we had . . . ”

The weight in D’s hand dwindled rapidly, along with her voice.

No one moved.

The dazzling light threw long, long shadows across the floor.

When one skinny boy raised his damp eyes at the sound of a door opening and closing, the beautiful Vampire Hunter had disappeared.

A few days later, a horse and its gorgeous rider were following the narrow road where the crusted remains of snow conspired with the shoots of young grass.

Though the night was over, a thick cover of leaden clouds shrouded the eastern sky. The rays of the morning sun didn’t reach the ground.

An almost imperceptible breeze fluttered the hem of the rider’s black coat as he crossed the sea of grass stretching far into the distance.

Behind the rider, there was the moan of the morning’s first electric bus approaching.

About fifteen feet ahead of him was a small bench. Humble though it was, this was a stop on a bus line connecting the Frontier and the Capital.

Noticing the horse and rider, the skinny boy seated on the bench looked up in surprise. The next moment, his expression became bashful and he looked down again. His gloveless hands were thoroughly chapped.

The small traveling bag by his side bore the address of his destination as well as his name—Marco.

The horse and rider passed by.

Shortly thereafter, there was the sound of the bus stopping. It drew closer, then passed.

Suddenly, a window opened and the boy stuck his head out.

Wildly waving his thin hand, he shouted something.

The piercing groan of the engine and wheels scribbled out his voice. But D could hear him. And this is what the boy had said: "I'm headed to the Capital. Gonna do the history of the Nobility."

A gust of wind blew, as if to chase after the bus.

D remembered.

The face of a boy listening the final words of a girl. A look of boundless pride in his eyes. The face of the someone who loved.

And D knew.

The messenger who left the white flowers, and let a girl dream.

At some point the clouds broke, and, as he watched the little bus disappear into the sun-showered distance, a faint smile started to rise on D's lips.

If that boy could have seen it, he would have told people for the rest of his days how he'd been the one to bring it out. It was just such a smile.

And now, a preview of the next novel in the
Vampire Hunter D series

Vampire Hunter D

Volume 3

Demon Deathchase

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VILLAGE OF THE DEAD

CHAPTER 1

The tiny village seemed to obstinately refuse the blessings that the sunlight poured down so generously from above.

Though a Frontier village like this might see its share of years, as a rule, the size of the community didn't fluctuate. The eighty or so homes wavered in the warming light. Every last bit of the lingering snow had been consumed by the black soil, and spring was near.

And yet—the village was dead.

Doors of reinforced plastic and specially treated lumber hung open, swinging with the feeble breeze; in the communal cookery, which should have been roiling with the lively voices of wives and children preparing for the evening meal, only dust danced alone.

Something was missing. People.

The majority of the homes remained in perfect order, with no signs of struggle, but in one or two there were overturned chairs in the living rooms. There was one house where the bed covers were disheveled, as if someone just settling down to sleep had gotten out of bed to attend to some trifling matter.

Had gotten out—and had never come back.

Small black stains could be found on the floors of that house. A number of spots no bigger than the tip of your little finger, they might be mistaken for something like a bit of fur off a pet. They wouldn't catch anyone's eye. Even if they wanted to, there were no people around with eyes to be caught.

Evening grew near, the white sunlight took on a dim, bluish tint, the wind blowing down the deserted streets grew more insistent, and an eerie atmosphere pervaded the village at dusk—like ebon silhouettes were coalescing in the shadows, training their bloodshot gaze on any travelers that might pass through the wide-open gates.

More time passed. Just when the dim shadows were beginning to linger in these streets settling into darkness, the sound of iron-shod hooves pounding the earth and the crunch of tires in well-worn ruts came drifting in through the entrance to the village.

A bus and three people on horseback came to a halt in front of one of the watchtowers just inside the gates.

The atomic-powered bus was the sort used for communications

across the Frontier, but its body had been modified, so that now iron bars were set into the windows and a trenchant plow was affixed to the front. The vehicle was not exactly the sort of thing upstanding folks had much call for.

Every inch of the vehicle was jet black—a perfect compliment to the foreboding air of the trio looming before it.

"What the hell's going on here?" asked the man on the right. He wore a black shirt and black leather pants. Conspicuous for his fierce expression and frightfully long torso, here was a man that would stand out anywhere.

"Don't look like our client's here to meet us," said the man on the far left. Though his face wore a wry smile, his thread-thin eyes brimmed with a terrible light as they scoured the surroundings. The hexagonal staff strapped to his well-defined back made his shadow appear impaled.

As if on cue, the two turned their heads toward the even more muscular giant in the center. From neck to wrist, his body was covered by a protector of thin metal and leather, but the mountain of muscles beneath it was still sharply defined. His face was like a chunk of granite that had sprouted whiskers, and he brimmed with an intensity that would most likely make a bear backpedal if it ran across him in the dark. Twining around him, the wind seemed to carry the stench of a beast as it blew off again.

"Looks like they've had it," he muttered in a stony tone. "The whole damn village gone in one night—looks like we lost the goose that laid the golden egg. Just to be sure, let's check out a few houses. Carefully."

"I ain't too crazy about that idea," the man in black said. "How 'bout we send Grove? For him it'd . . . " His voice died out halfway through the sentence. The giant had shot a glance at him. It was like being scrutinized by a stone. "I . . . er . . . I was just kidding, bro."

It wasn't merely the difference in their builds that made the man in black grow pale—it appeared as if he truly feared the giant. Quickly dismounting as the man with the hexagonal staff did likewise, they entered the village with a gliding gait.

There was the sound of the bus door opening, and the face of a girl, no more than twenty-two or twenty-three with blonde hair, peered out at the giant from the driver's seat. "Borgoff, what's up?" she asked. Though her visage was as lovely as a blossom, there was something unsettling about how overly alluring it was, something that called to mind a carnivorous insect—beautiful but deadly.

"Odds are the village's been wasted. Be ready to move on a

moment's notice." Saying that in a subdued tone, the world seemed to go topsy-turvy. His voice suddenly became gentle. "How's Grove?" he inquired.

"He's okay for the moment. Not likely to have another seizure for a while."

It was unclear whether or not the giant heard the girl's response, as he didn't so much as nod but kept gazing at the silent, lonely rows of houses. He flicked his eyes up toward the sky and the dingy ivory hue that lingered there. The round moon was already showing its pearly white figure.

"Wish we had a little more cloud cover."

Just as he'd muttered those words, two figures came speeding down the street as if riding the very wind.

"It's just like we thought. Not a single freaking person," the man in black said.

Then the man with the hexagonal staff also turned to the sky and said, "Sun'll be setting soon. The safest bet would be to blow this place as soon as possible, big guy." Saying that, he jabbed out his forefinger.

The giant easily pierced the hazy darkness with his vision, glimpsing the tiny black spot on the tip of that finger.

"Make for the graveyard," he said.

In a flash, a tense hue shot through the faces of the other men, but soon enough they too grinned, climbed effortlessly back on their horses, and boldly started their mounts down village streets that had fallen into the stillness of death.

So what had transpired in the village?

The entire populace of a village disappearing in one fell swoop wasn't such a bizarre occurrence on the Frontier. For example, the carnivorous balloonlike creatures known as flying jellyfish seemed to produce an extremely large specimen every twenty years or so, and, often reaching a mile and a quarter in diameter, the beast could cover an entire village and selectively dissolve the flesh off every living creature it detected.

Then there was the basilisk. A magical creature said to inhabit only mountain ravines and haunted valleys, it had merely to wait at the entrance to a village and stare fixedly at a given spot within. Its single, gigantic eye would glow a reddish tint before finally releasing a crimson beam, and villagers would come, first

one, then another, right into its fearsome waiting jaws. But the sole weakness of that beast was that, occasionally, one of the hypnotized humans would bid farewell to their family. When they did so, it was always in exactly the same words, and the remaining villagers would prepare to go out and hunt the basilisk as a group.

However, the most likely cause of every last person vanishing from an entire village was both the most familiar and the most terrifying of threats.

When news of such an eerie happening was passed along by even a single traveler lucky enough to have slipped through the vanished community unharmed, people could practically hear the footfalls of their dark lords, supposedly long since extinct, lingering in that area. The masters of the darkness—the vampires.

Having arrived at the graveyard on the edge of town, the trio of riders and the lone vehicle came to an abrupt halt. In a spot not five hundred yards from the forest, moss-encrusted gravestones formed serpentine rows, and there was an open space where, little by little, a blue-black darkness rose from the ground.

The group strode forward, continuously scanning their surroundings. Finally the group came to a halt in the depths of a forest that threatened to overrun the tombstones. From that spot alone, there blew a weird miasma. The ground above it looked as if something—some beast or demon—had churned over a large expanse of ground, revealing a red clay, the color of dried blood. The ghastly miasma over this exposed earth froze the leading pair atop their horses, and made the giant swallow so hard his Adam's apple thumped in his throat.

What lay concealed by this ravaged earth?

Moving only their eyes, the men scanned the area in search of the source of the miasma.

It was then that there was a dull sound.

No, it wasn't a sound, but rather a voice. A long, low groan—tormented and unabashed, like a patient having a seizure—began to snake through the uncanny tableau.

The men didn't move.

Partly it was the ghastly miasma, twisting tight around their bones and preventing them from moving. But, more than anything, they were frozen to the spot because that voice, those moans, seemed to issue from within the bus. When the giant had asked, hadn't the girl said that Grove wouldn't have a seizure? It must have been the bizarre atmosphere of this place that made a

liar out of her. Or perhaps his cries came because, no matter what illness afflicted them, there was something humans found horribly unsettling and inescapable about their condition.

It was a few seconds later that a figure appeared from behind one of the massive tree trunks, as if to offer some answer to the riddle.

A veritable ghost, it stepped its way across the red clay in a precarious gait, finally coming to a standstill at a spot about thirty feet ahead.

The figure loomed before the glimmering silver moon. An older man of fifty or so, with a dignified countenance and silver hair that seemed to give off a whitish glow, anyone would have taken the figure for a village elder. Actually, however, this old man was doing two things that, when witnessed by those who knew about such matters, were as disturbing as anything could possibly be.

He was using his left hand to pin his jacket, with its upturned collar, to his chest, while his open right hand covered his mouth—as if to conceal his teeth.

"Thank you for coming," the old man said. His voice seemed pained, like something he'd just managed to vomit up. "Thank you for coming . . . but you're too late. Every last soul in the village is done for, myself included, but . . . "

Surely these men must've noticed that, as he spoke, the old man didn't turn his eyes on them.

There was nothing before his pupils, stagnant and muddied like those of a dead fish. Only a long line of trees continuing on into the abruptly growing darkness.

"Hurry, go after him. He . . . he made off with my daughter. Please, hurry after them and get her back . . . Or if she's already one of them . . . Please make her end a quick one . . . "

Appealing, entreating, the old man went on in his reed-thin voice. Not so much as glancing at the men before him, he faced into empty space. With the darkness so dear to demons steadily creeping in around them, it was an unsettling sight.

"He'd been after my daughter for a while. Time after time he tried to take her, and each and every time I fought him off. But last night, he finally showed his fangs. Once he got one of us, the rest fell like dominoes . . . I'm begging you, save my daughter from that accursed fate. Last night, he . . . took off to the north. With your speed, there might still be time . . . If you manage to save my daughter, go to the town of Galiusha. My younger sister's there. If you explain the situation, she'll give you the ten million dalas I promised . . . I beg of you . . . "

At this point, the heap of dirt behind the old man underwent a change.

A small mound bulged up suddenly, and then a pale hand burst through it and into sight. Resembling the “dead man’s hand” flowers that bloomed only by night, this was in fact a real hand.

A deep grumbling filled the forest. Sheer malice, or a curse, the grumbling bore a thirst—an unquenchable thirst for blood that would last for all eternity.

The figures pushing through the dirt and rising one after another were the villagers, all transformed into vampires in the span of a single night.

Appearing just as they had in life, only now with complexions as sickly pale as paraffin, when the moonlight struck them they glowed with an eerie, pale-blue light.

There were burly men. There were dainty women. There were girls in dresses. There were boys in short pants. Nearly five hundred strong, their bloodshot eyes gleaming and mouths held humorless, words like unearthly or ghastly hardly sufficed to describe the way they stared intently at the men. So focused were their eyes, the figures didn’t even bother to knock off the dirt that clung to their heads and shoulders.

“Oh, it’s too late now. Kill us somehow and get out of here . . . Once it’s really night I’ll be . . . ” The old man’s left hand dropped. The pair of wounds that remained on the nape of his neck also showed on the necks of the other villagers.

It’s hard to say which happened first—the old man lowering his right hand, or their jaws dropping. For between his lips thrown perilously wide, a pair of fangs jutted from the upper gums.

“Yeah, now it’s getting interesting,” the man in black said in an understandably tense tone as he reached for the crescent blades at his waist.

Perhaps the spell that held them had been broken, for the hands of the man with the hexagonal staff were gliding to the weapon upon his back.

The old man zipped effortlessly forward, followed by the mob at his back.

“Giddyap!” As if this was just what he’d been waiting for, the man in black spurred his horse into action. The one with the hexagonal staff followed after him.

A number of the villagers had their heads staved in under the hooves, falling backwards only to have their sternums and abdomens trampled as well.

“What are you waiting for, freaks? Come and get it!” As the

man in black shouted, the heads of nearly half of the fang-baring villagers went sailing into the air, sliced cleanly like so many watermelons.

An instant later, silver light limned another corona, and the heads flew from the next rank. Even novice vampires like these knew they mustn't lose their heads or brains, but they dropped to the ground leaking gray matter or spouting bloody geysers as if they were fountainheads.

What had severed the heads of the vampire victims so cleanly was one of the blades that'd hung at the man's waist, about a foot in diameter and shaped like a half-moon. Honed to a razor-fine arc, it was known among the warriors of the Frontier as the crescent blade. A wire or cord was usually affixed to one end, and the wielder could set up a sort of safety zone around himself and keep his enemies at bay by spinning it as widely or tightly as he wished. Due to the intense training necessary to handle it, however, there were few who could use the weapon so effectively.

But now, the weapons swished from both hands of the man in black to paint gorgeous silver arcs, slashing through villagers like magic—to the right and the left, above him and below, never missing the slightest change in their position. In fact, each and every one of the villagers had clearly been cut from a different angle. His attacks came with such speed and from phantasmal angles! It didn't seem possible anything he set his sights on would be spared.

Another particularly weird sound, entirely different from the slice of the crescent blade, came from his companion's favorite weapon—the hexagonal staff that he always carried on his back. Both ends of the staff had sharp protrusions, veritable stakes, but normally this weapon would be spun and used to bludgeon opponents. On this night, its owner was using the hexagonal staff in this manner. However, the way that he swung it around was quite intense. Spinning it around his waist like a waterwheel set on its side, he smashed the head of a foe to his right, spun it clear around his back, and took out an opponent on his left. The movement took less than a tenth of a second.

In a snap, four shadowy figures hung in the air to the left and the right of the man with the hexagonal staff, and before and behind him as well. This leaping assault capitalized on the superhuman strength unique to vampires.

The man with the hexagonal staff struck the first blow. His movements were sheer magic.

An instant after he staved in the hoary head of the old man to his right, the old woman before him went sailing through the air

with her bottom jaw knocked clear off. With almost no delay, the two to his left and behind him were both speared through the heart by the tips of his staff.

What kind of strength did this ungodly display demand? Actually, the man with the hexagonal staff had his right arm stock-still up around the shoulder. To all appearances his right hand from the wrist down didn't quiver in the least, and the staff seemed to move of its own accord, giving the impression of smashing the villagers all by itself.

It wasn't humanly possible.

Still, the villagers numbered five hundred. Even with the skills this pair had, they couldn't keep them from attacking the bus. In fact, many of the vampires ignored the two of them and pounded across the ground in a dash for the vehicle.

Every time the wind howled, a number of them screamed and dropped in unison. The wind roared, and villagers fell like strings of beads.

Arrows from the giant's bow skewered them together.

The bow itself wasn't the kind of finished good you'd find for sale in city shops. It was a savage thing, just a handy low-hanging branch that'd been snapped off and strung with the gut of some beast. Even the contents of the quivers strapped to both the giant's flanks and his back were no more than simple iron rods filed to a point.

But, in the hands of this giant, they became missiles of unrivaled accuracy.

The giant didn't use them one by one. Drawing back five at a time, he released them simultaneously. The acts of both getting the arrows out and then notching them seemed to be simplicity itself. Judging from his speed, he seemed to just be shooting wildly, without taking aim.

And yet, not a single one missed the mark. Not only did they not miss, but each arrow must have pierced the hearts of at least three villagers. This was only the natural thing to do, given that vampires wouldn't die by being run through the stomach. The question was, how could he choose a target and move his bow in less time than it took to blink?

This remained a mystery even as the villagers fell, corpse upon corpse, before the bus.

It was then that a small shriek arose from behind the mounted men. They heard a woman's voice, yelling from inside the bus.

"That ain't good—Fall back!"

Before the giant had even shouted the words, the men were whipping around toward the bus behind them.

With a bestial snarl the villagers started to run. When the rapidly dwindling distance had shrunk to a mere fifteen feet, the ground-pounding feet of the fiends came to an unexpected halt.

A lone youth suddenly stood between them and the bus, blocking the vampires' approach.

But it was not that alone that stopped the rush of these bloodthirsty creatures. For starters, there was the question of where this youth had appeared from.

With the gentle wave of his forelock touching his brow, his face was strong and healthy, and his innocent eyes gazed at the hell-spawn without a hint of fear.

The villagers, who'd hesitated due to the way he'd unexpectedly appeared, must have deemed him the most desirable of prey, and an instant later they were pressing forward as quickly as a bloodthirsty tide.

And then, something happened.

Into the darkness were born a number of streaks of light.

Like silvery fish that burst flying through the waves, the beams of light looked as chaotic as spindrift, but their accuracy was truly peerless. Each individual flash lanced through the hearts of countless villagers. Five hundred vampires hit in a mere instant . . .

Flames spouting from their chests, the villagers fell. Writhing, then stiffening, the peaceful faces that came in due time were surely the ones they'd had until dusk of the day before. The masks of death returned them to their natural state.

From the cover of the bus, the man with the hexagonal staff slowly showed his face. Seeing the corpses lying in heaps, he said, "Wow, pretty damn intense," then gave an appreciative whistle. He looked up at one of the windows on the bus and asked, "Is good ol' Grove doing all right?" His expression was somewhat concerned.

The young man who had arrived so mysteriously in their midst had already vanished, every bit as suddenly as he'd appeared.

"It couldn't be helped, and what's done is done," the man in black said. "We've got bigger fish to fry. The geezer said the Noble that grabbed his daughter took off to the north, right? If we go now, we could definitely catch up to 'em, bro. We could track 'em, run 'em down. Ten million if we bring her back safe. Sure he's probably already had his way with her, but what the hell, we'd be dealing with a woman on the other end. We could threaten her, tell her we chopped the girl's head off along with the vampire's and turned her back into a human. She'd keep her trap shut and pay."

Behind him, the giant muttered, “That’d all be well and good, if he was talking to us.”

“What do you mean?”

The man in black looked at the giant’s face, then followed his line of sight. The giant was watching the thicket ahead of them and off to the right. Earlier, that was the spot the old man had addressed when he spoke.

“Come on out!”

As the giant said this, a crescent blade in the man in black’s right hand gleamed in the moonlight, and the hexagonal staff ripped through the wind.

They, too, had known that this unearthly miasma hadn’t belonged to the old man. The one responsible for it was in the woods. Their hands went to their weapons. The chill they felt now they had felt before. It was the one that radiated from the unearthly Nobility. Humiliated at not figuring it out sooner, they grabbed at their weapons.

“If you don’t come out, we’re coming in,” the giant yelled, “but from the way that old man was talking to you, I’m guessing we’ve gotta be in the same line of work. Hell, it seems you’re even more dependable than we are. If that’s the case, we don’t wanna do nothing stupid. What do you say we talk this ten million deal out all friendly-like?” The giant waited for a response, but there was nothing, not even any movement from the woods. The giant’s thick, caterpillar-like eyebrows were hoisted up quickly.

“Bro, this way’s a lot quicker.”

The crescent blade flew from the hand of the man in black. It wove through the trees at incredible speed, racing to the spot the giant was glowering at. It was an assault devoid of ceremony, but steeped in murderous intent.

There was a beautiful sound. A silver flash of light coursed out from between the trees.

The two men yelped and jumped out of the way. Behind them, there was the sound of steel striking darkness.

What the giant now grasped in his right hand was the same crescent blade the man in black had just unleashed. A red band was slowly running down its finely honed surface—fresh blood pouring from the giant’s hand. The emotional hue welling up now on that rocklike face was one of fury, and also one of fright.

“Not bad,” said the man with the hexagonal staff, giving a kick to his horse’s flanks.

It didn’t move.

Once again he kicked. His boots had spurs on the heels. The hide on the flanks broke, and blood trickled out. And yet, still the

horse did not move.

When he noticed it was thoroughly cowed, the man with the hexagonal staff finally stopped giving it the spurs.

The door of the bus opened. A girl stuck her head out and asked, “What’s going on, guys?” Acutely sensitive to the unearthly presence, her beautiful face turned automatically to the depths of the woods, imitating her older brothers.

In the depths of the darkness, the presence stirred. The clop of hooves drew steadily closer.

Suddenly, the youth was before them, bathed in moonlight. It was as if the darkness itself had crystallized and taken human form.

Mysterious as the sparkle of the blue pendant shining from the breast of his black coat was, it ranked a distant second to the gorgeous visage below the traveler’s hat.

Astride his horse, clutching the reins in his fist, he looked as calm as any traveler passing through by happenstance, but, of course, he was far from being a mere traveler.

“What the hell are you supposed to be?” the man in black asked in a thick, lethargic tone. Those good looks, enough to send chills down the spine of even a man like him, combined with the knowledge that this guy had just batted back his lethal attack, made him speak in this strange voice.

The shadowy figure didn’t answer, but seemed intent on casually breezing by them.

“Hold up,” the man with the hexagonal staff shouted in an attempt to stop him. “Look, buddy, you might be one of the Hunters that geezer called, but so are we. Sure, we might’ve been in the wrong, flying off and taking a poke at you like that, but there’s no harm in us all introducing ourselves. We’re the Marcus clan—I’m Nolt, the second oldest of the boys.”

The shadowy figure halted his advance.

“This here’s Kyle, the youngest brother,” Nolt continued.

Eyes gleaming with animosity, the man in black made no attempt at a greeting.

“The great big fella is our older brother Borgoff.”

Just as his brother finished introducing him, a sharp sound came from around the giant’s thigh. The crescent blade, now in two pieces, fell to the ground with a shower of glittering silver flecks. The unusual break in it was not from folding it. It was from squeezing it. The giant wiped his bloody palm on his horse’s ear. Blood stuck to the fur.

“We’ve got another brother, but he’s sick and doesn’t get out of our ride. And finally, there’s Leila, our baby sister.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Tight-lips.” Behind that oh-so-amiable voice, her bright, feline eye burned with flames of hostility. However, when the face of the traveler made a rapid turn in her direction, those flames suddenly wavered.

“The Marcus clan . . . I’ve heard of you,” the traveler said, speaking for the first time. Without inflection, his voice was like iron, devoid of all emotion. Perhaps it didn’t suit his incredibly good looks, or then again, it may have been that no other voice would have been more appropriate.

However, the fact that he spoke in such a tone, even after learning the names of these men . . .

The Marcus clan was the most skillful Vampire-hunting group on the Frontier. Consisting of five members, the family, from oldest to youngest, was Borgoff, Nolt, Groveck, Kyle, and Leila. The number of Nobles they’d taken care of easily reached triple digits, and word of how, miraculously, none of the clan had been lost in the process circulated far and wide among the people of the Frontier.

At the same time, so did tales of the clan’s cruelty and callousness.

Nowhere did it say that only one Vampire Hunter or group of Hunters could be hired for a given case. Considering the vengeance the Nobility would wreak in the event of failure, it was perfectly normal to employ a number of individual Hunters, or even several groups.

The Marcus clan always lasted until the very end. They alone. No individual or group that had worked with them, or against them for that matter, had ever survived.

Due to the fact that none of their corpses had ever been recovered, there was no choice but to believe the Marcus’ claims that the other Hunters were slain by the Nobility, but rumors spread like wildfire. Now, an ominous storm cloud of suspicion followed them wherever they went.

Be that as it may, no one doubted their abilities as Hunters. After all, the number of Nobility their group had single-handedly destroyed was staggering. Even other Hunters—who abhorred them for their cruelty—never failed to be impressed by their skill, even awed by their ability.

In all likelihood, this was probably the first time the clan had ever heard a man say their name so calmly.

“Look, jerk—” Unexpectedly, the giant—Borgoff—made a strange face. “Um . . . er . . . pal . . . I’ve heard about someone

with your looks and a blue pendant. Ten years back, this one village elder told us there was only one Hunter in all the Frontier that was a match for us. That alone he was probably tougher than all of us put together, or some such thing. But you couldn't be . . . "

Giving no answer, the young man turned away, as if the fearsome clan members didn't exist.

"Uh, hey, wait up," the man with the hexagonal staff called out. "We're going after the Noble that grabbed the geezer's daughter. If you're not with us, that makes you an enemy, too. Is that the way you want it?"

There was no response, and the silhouette of the horse and rider were swallowed by the darkness.

"We're not gonna let him go, are we?" Leila asked indignantly. Borgoff didn't seem to be listening,

"A dhampir . . . Is that what he is then . . . ?" he muttered with an imbecilic look on his face. This was the first time the younger siblings had heard the man speak in such a tone.

Or say a certain, mysterious name.

"I've finally met a man I actually fear . . . The Vampire Hunter D."

The spot was thirty miles north of the village of Vishnu, where wholesale slaughter followed tragedy by just two short days.

A lone black carriage rushed along the narrow road through the forest. The six horses that pulled it were ebon, too, and the driver in the coachman's perch was garbed in black, so that the whole vehicle seemed born of the darkness.

Showering the horses with merciless lashes, the driver occasionally looked to the heavens.

The sky was so full of stars it seemed to be falling, and the light from the stars was so strong it seemed to flicker on the face gazing up. The graceful visage of the driver clouded suddenly.

"The stars moved. Those giving chase . . . to me . . . Six of them." In the darkness, the driver's eyes began to give off a blazing light. "And no mere pursuers at that. Each possessed of extraordinary skill. One of them in particular . . . "

As if unable to contain his agitation, the driver stood bolt upright in the coachman's perch, shaking the jet-black vehicle beneath his feet.

"I won't let them have her. I won't let anyone take her away." Light coursed from the eyes he opened wide. Blood light.

There was a sudden discordance in the monotonous drone of

the carriage wheels.

When turbulence had raced into that graceful face, one of the right wheels slipped off the axle with a crash. The wind groaned and the carriage lurched wildly to the right, kicking up a thick cloud of dust as it rolled over.

What was truly unbelievable was the acrobatic skill of the driver. Releasing the reins of his own accord and sailing through the air, he regained his balance by skillfully twisting his body, landing like a length of black cloth a few yards from the carriage.

Anxiety and despair filled his face as he dashed to the vehicle.

Throwing the door open like a man possessed, he peered inside. His anxiety was replaced by relief.

Letting out a deep sigh, he approached the special metal alloy wagon wheel that lay some thirty feet away.

"So, misfortune has decided to put in an unfashionably early appearance," he muttered glumly, easily lifting the wheel and walking back to the carriage. He looked to the sky once again. In a low voice, he said, "Soon the day will be breaking. Seems I shall be walking to the Shelter, and repairing this when it's night again. That's more than enough time for those dogs to catch up to us."

Around the time the mountain ridges were rising faintly from the darkness like the edges of so many jigsaw puzzle pieces, the pair halted their horses. They were atop a fair-sized hill.

"Ol' Borgoff's got us doing some crazy shit, riding hard in the middle of the night like this. I tell you, he's all worked up over nothing," the man in black said, giving a light wave of his right hand. The green grass below him was shaken by a dye deeper than the darkness.

In the pale, panting darkness of daybreak, this man alone seemed blackly clad in the remnants of night. In a black shirt and pants, it was Kyle, the youngest of the Marcus boys. The ebon flecks that remained like stains not just on his right hand, but on his chest and shoulder as well, were probably splashes of blood from all the nocturnal beasts they'd cut down on the way there.

"I thought he told you to stow that talk. That punk—he's no garden-variety Hunter. You must've heard about him, too," the man—Nolt, the second oldest—said, attempting to settle his wild younger brother. A black staff loomed on Nolt's back.

"Ha! You mean how he's a dhampir?" Kyle spat the words. "A lousy *half-breed*, part Nobility and part human. Oh, sure, everyone says they make the best Vampire Hunters, don't they? But let's not forget something. We slaughter real, full-blooded Nobles!"

“Hey, you’ve got a point there.”

“If he’s a half-breed, he’s more like us than the Nobility. Nothing to be afraid of. Not to mention, we even rode all night just so he wouldn’t lose us, but, if you ask me, our big brother’s lost his nerve. Who besides us would race through a Frontier forest in the middle of the night on horseback?”

Out on the Frontier, the forests were thick with monsters by night.

Though it was true the beasts’ numbers had decreased with the decline of the Nobility, a person either had to be a complete idiot to move through the woods before dawn, or he had to be endowed with nerves of steel and considerable skill. As the brothers were.

For this reason, Kyle was repulsed by the decision of the oldest of the boys, who’d ordered their charge by night so that the youth they’d met earlier wouldn’t get a lead on them. Even he would be set upon by numerous creatures before he made it to this hill. The only reason they’d somehow managed to get there before daybreak was because they knew a shortcut through the woods.

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Nolt said wryly, being more philosophical than the youngest boy. “We’re talking about a guy that fended off your crescent blade, after all.”

While Kyle was surely glaring at the second oldest, Nolt’s eyes glimmered. “A horse . . . I wouldn’t have thought it possible.”

Kyle was at a loss for words. Surely enough, the sound of iron-shod hooves was approaching from the depths of the same forest from which the two of them had just emerged. “It was no problem for us because we knew a shortcut. But that son of a bitch . . . ”

Just as the two were exchanging glances, a horse and rider appeared from part of the forest below them, knifing through the darkness. Making a smooth break for the road, the figure struck them as being darker than the blackness.

“It’s him alright,” said Nolt.

“He ain’t getting away,” Kyle shot back.

There was a loud smack at the flanks of the pair’s mounts, and hooves were soon kicking up the sod.

With intense energy they pursued the black-clad silhouette. The way he raced, he seemed a demon of the night, almost impossible to catch.

“We got orders from Borgoff. Don’t try nothing funny.” Nolt’s voice flew at Kyle’s back, riding about a length ahead of him.

They couldn’t let D get too far away, but, on the other hand, they were told not to do anything rash like attack him. This Borgoff had ordered in the sternest tone they’d ever heard from

him.

But for all that, the flames of malice burned in Kyle's breast. It wasn't simply that he had the wildest and most atrocious nature of all his siblings. His lethal crescent blade attack had been warded off by D. For a young man with faith in strength alone, the humiliation was intolerable. What he felt toward D had surpassed hatred and become nothing less than pure murderous intent.

Kyle's right hand went for the crescent blade at his waist.

But, however much Kyle wanted to start a fight, they just couldn't catch up.

They should have been closing the gap on D—he didn't seem to be riding any faster than they were—but the distance between them was increasing. The brothers were rapidly falling farther and farther behind.

"Son of a bitch," Kyle screamed. Even as he put more power behind the kicks to his horse, his foe still dashed away, the tail of his black coat fluttering in the breeze he left, shrinking to the size of a pea and then vanishing from their field of view. "Dammit. Goddamn freak!"

Giving up and bringing his horse to a halt, Kyle trained his flaming pupils on the point in the road that had swallowed the shadowy figure.

"We ride all night, only to have this happen in the end . . . " Nolt's tone was bitter as well. "From the looks of it, we're never gonna catch up to him by normal means. Let's wait here for Borgoff to show up."

Around him, the wind swirled.

His hair streamed out, and the wide brim of the traveler's hat seemed to flow like ink. The silver flecks crumbling dreamlike against his refined brow and graceful nose were moonlight. Though the air already wore a tinge of blue, the moonlight reflected in his gaze shone as brightly as in the blackest of nights. While it was possible for a specially modified cyborg horse to gallop along at an average speed of about sixty miles per hour, the speed they were riding put that to shame.

What can be said about a rider who could work such magic on an average steed?

The road dwindled into the distant flatness of the plain.

Without warning, the rider pulled back on the reins. The horse's forequarters swung widely to the right, while the sudden stop by the forelegs kicked up gravel and dirt. This rather intense method of braking was not so much mesmerizing as it was mildly

unsettling.

Once again, the moonlight fell desolately on the rider's shoulders and back.

Without a sound, the black-clad figure got to the ground. Bending down, he patiently scrutinized lines in the dirt and gravel, but he soon stood bolt upright and turned his face toward the nearby stand of trees.

This person, possessed of such beauty it seemed to make the moonlight bashful to be around him, was none other than D.

"So, this is where they left the usual route then. What's he up to?" Muttering in a way that seemed less a question than a statement, he mounted his horse and galloped toward the tree line.

After he disappeared into the trees, all that remained was the moonlight starkly illuminating the narrow road and the distant echo of hoofbeats, fading to nothing in no time at all.

The moon alone knew that some six hours earlier a driver in black coming down the road had changed the direction of his carriage in that very spot. Had D discerned the tracks of that particular carriage from all the ruts left by the number of electric buses and other vehicles that passed over the road by day?

Shortly thereafter the moon fused with the pale sky, and in its place the sun rose.

Before the sun reached its zenith, D and his steed, who'd been galloping all the while, broke out of another in an endless progression of forests. They halted once again.

The ground before him had been wildly disturbed. This was the spot where the carriage had lost a wheel and rolled.

Starting out a full twenty-four hours late, D had caught up in half a day. Of course, it was the fate of the Nobility to sleep while the sun was high, and the Marcus clan was still far behind him. The speed and precision of the pursuit by the mount and rider was frightening.

But where had the carriage gone?

Without getting off his horse, D glanced at the overturned soil, then gave a light kick to his mount's flanks.

They headed for a small hill at a gradual pace, quite a change from the speed they had been galloping.

It was a mound of dirt that really couldn't be called a hill, but it gave D the perspective he needed. Standing atop it looking down, D's eyes were greeted by the sudden appearance of a structure that was quite out of place.

It looked like a huge steel box, with a width and height of more than ten feet and a length of easily thirty. In the brilliant

sunlight that poured down, the black surface threw off blinding flames.

This was the Shelter the Noble in black had mentioned.

Immortal though the vampires might be, they still had to sleep by day. While their scientific prowess had spawned various antidotes for sunlight, they never succeeded in conquering the hellish pain that came when their whole body was exposed to the sunlight. The agony of cells blazing one by one, flesh and blood putrefying, every bodily system dissolving—even the masters of the earth were still forced to submit to the limitations of their biology.

Though the vampires had reached the point where their bodies wouldn't be destroyed, many of the test subjects subjected to more than ten minutes of direct sunlight were driven insane by the pain. Those exposed for even five minutes were left crippled, their regenerative abilities destroyed. And, no matter what treatment they later received, they never recovered.

But, in the Nobility's age of prosperity, that had mattered little.

Superspeed highways wound to every distant corner of the Frontier, linear motor cars and the like formed a transportation grid that boasted of completely accident-free operation, and the massive energy production facilities erected in and around the Capital constantly provided buses and freight cars that mimicked those of ancient times, but with an infinite store of energy.

And then the decline began.

At the hands of the surging tide of humanity, all that the Nobility had constructed was destroyed piece by piece, reducing the Nobles' civilization to ruins. Even the power plants with their perfect defense systems collapsed before mankind's tenacious millennia-spanning assault.

While the situation wasn't so dire in metropolitan areas, Nobility in the Frontier sectors were stripped of all means of transportation. Though there were many in the Nobility who'd expected this day would come and had established transportation networks in the sectors they controlled, they eventually lost the enthusiasm and the desire to maintain the networks themselves.

Even now, silver rails ran through prairies damp with the mists of dawn, and somewhere in colossal subterranean tunnels lay the skeletons of automated ultrafast hovercrafts.

Before carriages became the sole means of transportation, accidents due to power outages or the failure of radar control

occurred frequently.

To the humans, who had taken the scientific weapons of the Nobility and could penetrate the vehicular defenses with armaments they had devised on their own, Nobles in transit were the ideal prey. It helped that the Nobles were immobilized by day.

Due to the intense demand from the Frontier, the Nobles' government in the Capital constructed special defensive structures at strategic locations along their transportation network.

These were the Shelters.

Though their special steel plating was only a fraction of an inch thick, it could withstand a direct hit from a small nuclear device. In addition, there was a vast array of defensive mechanisms to dispose of any of the human insects who might be buzzing around with stakes and hammers in hand.

But, what made these shelters perfect, more than anything else, was one simple thing.

"There's no entrance?" D muttered from atop his horse.

Exactly. The jet-black walls that reflected the white radiance didn't have so much as a hair-sized crack.

Looking up at the heavens, D silently started down the hill.

The pleasant vernal temperature aside, the sunlight that ruthlessly scorched him was unparalleled agony for a dhampir like D. Dhampirs alone could battle with the Nobility on equal terms by night, but to earn the title of Vampire Hunter, they needed the strength to remain impassive in the blistering hell the daylight hours could be.

As D drew closer, it seemed the surrounding air bore an almost imperceptible groan, but that soon scattered in the sunlight.

At D's breast, his pendant glowed ever bluer. It was a mysterious hue that rendered all of the Nobility's electronic armaments inoperable.

Dismounting in front of the sheer black wall, D put his right hand to the steel. A chilling sensation spread through him. The temperature was probably unique to this special steel. Perhaps it was because, to render the exterior of this structure impervious to all forms of heat or electronic waves, molecular motion was altered.

D's hand glided slowly across the smooth surface.

Finishing the front wall, he moved to the right side. It took thirty minutes to run his hand over that side.

"Sheesh," said a voice of unmatched boredom. The voice came from between the steel and the palm of his hand. The voice sighed, and D moved to the back wall. If there'd been anyone there to hear it, this bizarre little scene would have undoubtedly

made the eyes bug out of their head, but D continued his work in silence.

"Yep, this metal sure is tough stuff. The situation inside is kind of hazy. Still, I'm getting a picture of the general setup. The superatomic furnace inside is sending energy into the metal itself. You can't break through the walls without destroying the atomic furnace, but, in order to do that, you'd have to bust through the walls first. So, which came first, the chicken or the egg?"

"How many are inside?" D asked, still brushing along the wall.

"Two," came the quick reply. "A man and a woman. But even I can't tell whether they're Nobility or human."

Without so much as a nod, D finished feeling over the back wall.

Only the left side remained.

But what in the world was he doing? Judging from what the voice said, he seemed to be searching the interior of the Shelter, but if the outer walls couldn't be breached, that was pointless. On the other hand, the voice explained that destroying the outer walls would be impossible.

About halfway down the steel wall, the left hand halted.

"Got it," the voice said disinterestedly.

D wasted no time going into action. Without removing his left hand from the Shelter wall, he took a step back, reaching with his right for the sword sheathed on his back. The blade seemed to drink up the sunlight.

Drawing his sword far back, D focused his eyes on a single point on the wall. A spot between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand.

But what had they discovered? The instant an awesome white bloodlust coalesced between the naked sword tip and the steel, a pale light pierced the black wall.

It was D's sword that streamed forth. Regardless of how trenchant that thrust might be, there was no way it could penetrate the special steel of the outer walls. Be that as it may, the graceful arc sank halfway into the unyielding metal wall.

That's where the entrance was. His blade was wedged in the boundary between door and wall, though that line was imperceptible to the naked eye. With the mysterious power of his left hand, D had located it, then thrust into it. Granted that there was a space there, how could the tip of his sword slip into an infinitesimal gap?

"Wow!" The voice that said this came not from the interior, but rather from D's left hand. "Now here's a surprise. One of them is human."

D's expression shifted faintly. "Do they have Time-Bewitching Incense?" he asked. That was a kind of incense the Nobility had devised to give day the illusion it was night.

"I don't know, but the other one's not moving. A dead man, at least by day."

"The girl's okay then?" D muttered. Most likely she'd been bitten at least once, but, even if that were the case, destroying the one responsible would restore her humanity. But why then did a dark shadow skim for an instant across D's features?

The muscles of the hand he wrapped around the hilt bulged slowly. It's unclear what kind of exquisite skill was at work, but the slightest twist of the horizontal blade sent a sharp thin line racing across the steel surface.

Blue light oozed out.

D immediately ceased all activity. Silently, he turned his face to the rear. His cold pupils were devoid of any emotion.

"Earlier than I expected," the voice said. "And not who I expected at all."

Presently, the faint growl of an engine approached from the forest, and then a crimson figure leapt over the crest of the hill.

Raising a cacophony, it was a single-seat battle car that stopped right at the bottom of the slope.

The vehicle was an oblong iron plate set on four grotesquely oversized puncture-proof tires, crammed with a high-capacity atomic engine and some controls. The product of humans who got their hands on some of the Nobility's machinery, its outward appearance was a far cry from what the average person might call aesthetically pleasing. An energy pipe with conspicuous welding marks twisted like a snake from the rear-mounted engine to a core furnace shielded by studded iron plate, and the simple barlike steering yoke jutted artlessly from the floor. Churning in the air like the legs of a praying mantis, the pistons connected to the tires were covered with a black grime that came from the vehicle's harmless radioactive waste.

But perhaps what warranted more attention than the appearance of the vehicle was it armaments and its driver. Looming large from the right flank of the rear-mounted engine was the barrel of a seventy-millimeter recoilless bazooka, staring blackly at D, while on the other side, the left, a circular twenty-millimeter missile pod glowered at empty space. The missiles were equipped with body-heat seekers, and naught save certain death awaited their prey. Finally, mounted ominously atop the core furnace, exhibiting a muzzle that looked like it had a blue jewel set in the middle of it, was the penetrator—a cannon with grave

piercing power.

Yet, despite the fact that it had a lot of heavy equipment not found on the average battle car, judging from the size of the core furnace and engine, this vehicle could easily be pressed for speeds of seventy-five miles per hour. It would run safely on ninety-nine percent of all terrain, and, thanks to its three-quarter-inch wire suspension, it could be driven on even the worst of roads. It raced across the ground, a miniature behemoth.

A figure in crimson rose from the driver's seat and jerked a pair of sturdy goggles off. Blue eyes that seemed ablaze took in D. Blonde hair lent its golden hue to the wind. It was Leila, the younger sister of the Marcus clan.

"So, we meet again," the girl said.

The animosity radiating from every inch of her made her vermilion coverall blaze in the sunlight. Her body, jolting to the incessant groaning of the engine, seemed to twitch with loathing.

"You might've thought you beat my older brothers just fine, but as long as I'm around you can't steal a march on the Marcus clan. Seems I ran into you at just the right spot. Is my prey in there?" This girl referred to the Nobility as her prey. She spat the words with a self-confidence and hostility that was beyond the pale.

D continued to stand there, sword in hand, like a sculpture.

"Out of my way," Leila said. The tone was that of an order. "It was unfortunate for my prey that they had nothing but this broken Shelter, and fortunate for you, but now I'll be taking that good fortune, thank you. If you value your life, you'd best turn tail now."

"And if I don't value it, what'll you do?"

D's soft voice caused a shade of vermilion every bit as vivid as her raiment to shoot into her face.

"How's that? You seriously want to tangle with Leila Marcus and her battle car?"

"I have two lives. Take whichever one you like. That is, if you can."

The serene voice—unchanged since the first time they'd met—made Leila fall silent. The tomboy hesitated.

She hadn't realized yet that the blade piercing the wall of the Shelter had done so due to D's secret skill alone. From the very start, it never crossed her mind that anything alive could perform such a feat. Still unaware of D's true power, the hesitation on Leila's part was born of movements in her heart to which she was yet oblivious.

The competitor in black left her feeling shockingly numbed,

working on her like a mysterious drug, an anesthetic that violated her to the very marrow of her bones. As if to strip the movement from her heart, Leila roughly jerked her goggles back down.

"That's too bad. This is the way we Marcuses do it!" Just as the crimson coverall settled back in the driver's seat, the engine howled. She'd purposely cut the muffler to antagonize her opponents. The instant her hands took the controls, the massive tires flattened the grass. Not so much coming down the hill, the vehicle was closer to flying, and it kicked up the earth even as it touched back down. In less than a tenth of a second it had taken off again. Its speed didn't seem that of a mechanical construct.

It made a mad rush straight for D.

D didn't move.

A terrible sound shook the air, now mixing with a fishy stench. The smell was accompanied by smoke. White smoke billowing from the burnt tires, the vehicle stopped just inches short of D.

"You're gonna feel this to the bone. Here I come!" Leila's hysterical shouts were just another attempt to conceal the movements of her own heart. The foot that floored the gas to run down D had hit the brake a hair's breadth from crushing him. But why hadn't D moved? It was as if he'd read the ripples spreading through her chest.

Without saying a word, he pulled back on his stuck sword. It came free all too quickly. Sheathing it without a sound in a single fluid movement, D turned.

"I thought you'd see it my way. You should've done that from the get-go. Could've saved us both some trouble by not trying to act so damn tough." Leila kept her eye on D until he'd climbed the hill and disappeared over the summit. An instant later, tension drew her feline eyes tight.

With a low groan, the earth shook violently. Though it weighed over a ton, the battle car was tossed effortlessly into the air, smashed to the ground, and was tossed up again.

Now that D had gone, the Shelter's defense systems sprang into action.

Though it looked impossible to steady, Leila stood impassively in her car. She had one hand on the yoke, but that was all. She remained perpendicular to the car throughout its crazed dance—as if the soles of her feet were glued to the floorboards.

In midair, Leila took her seat.

The engine made a deafening roar. Blue atomic flames licked from the rear nozzles, and smoke from the spent radioactive fuel flew from exhaust pipes. The battle car took off in midair.

As it touched down, the penetrator over the engine swiveled to

point at the Shelter. Unhindered by the wildly rocking earth, bounding with each shock, the car never lost its bearing.

The air was stained blue.

The ceiling of the Shelter opened, and a laser cannon reminiscent of a radar dish appeared and spurted out a stream of fire. It skimmed the airborne body of the car and reduced a patch of earth to molten lava.

If the Shelter's weapon was radar controlled, then there was certainly cause to be alarmed. The second and third blasts of fire, usually vaunted for their unmatched precision, missed their target, as Leila slipped in front or behind, to the left or right of where they fell.

Her skill behind the wheel surpassed these electronic devices.

As far back as she could remember, the clan's father had always impressed upon her how important it was that she refine her skills at manipulating anything and everything mechanical. Her father may have even known some basic genetic enhancement techniques.

Ironically, Leila's talents only seemed to shine when it came to modes of transportation. Whether it was a car or even something with a life of its own—like a cyborg horse—her skillful touch gave them new abilities. "Give her an engine and some wheels and she'll whip up a car," her father had said with admiration. Her skill at operating vehicles surpassed that of all her brothers. Only the oldest boy Borgoff even came close.

And how Leila loved her battle car. It'd been crafted from parts gathered in junkyards during the clan's travels. Some parts she had even taken from the ruins of the Nobility, when the opportunity presented itself. She'd quite literally forgotten to eat or sleep while she worked on it. Early one winter morning, the battle car was completed by the feeble, watery light of dawn. Two years had passed since then. Loving that car like a baby that'd kicked in her own belly, Leila learned to drive it with a skill that was miraculous.

The very epitome of that skill was being played out on this hill-hemmed patch of ground. Avoiding every attack by the Shelter's electronic devices, the battle car changed direction in midair. Just as the laser's fraction-of-a-second targeting delay was ending, the penetrator discharged a silvery beam.

It was form of liquid metal. Expelled at speeds in excess of Mach one, its molecular structure altered as it flew, changing it to a five-yard-long spear that shot right through the workings of the laser cannon. Sending electromagnetic waves out in all directions like tentacles, the laser was silenced. As she brought the

penetrator's muzzle to bear on one wall of the Shelter, a bloody smile rose on Leila's lips.

Suddenly, her target blurred. Or more accurately, the car sank. As if the land surrounding the Shelter had become a bog, the car was now sinking nose-first into the ground.

Leila's tense demeanor collapsed, deteriorating into devil-may-care laughter.

The rear nozzles pivoted with a screech and disgorged fire. Flames ran along the sides of the vehicle, blowing away the rocky soil that swallowed the battle car's muzzle. The tires were spinning at full speed. Whipping up a trail of dust, the battle car took to the air tail first. It spun to face the hill even before it had touched back down. The penetrator's turret swiveled and hurled a blast of silver light against the Shelter wall.

The blast broke in two, and, in the same instant, was reduced to countless particles of light that flew in all directions. Even Leila's driving skills couldn't get her through this web of shrapnel.

However . . .

Landing back on solid ground, the battle car went straight for the storm of metallic particles with its body at a wild tilt as it pulled a wheelie. The darkness-shredding bullets sank into the belly of the car.

Giving the engine full throttle, Leila pushed her vehicle to the top of the hill in one mad dash.

To be continued in

VAMPIRE HUNTER D

VOLUME 3

DEMON DEATHCHASE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hideyuki Kikuchi was born in Chiba, Japan in 1949. He attended the prestigious Aoyama University and wrote his first novel *Demon City Shinjuku* in 1982. Over the past two decades, Kikuchi has authored numerous horror novels, and is one of Japan's leading horror masters, writing novels in the tradition of occidental horror authors like Fritz Leiber, Robert Bloch, H. P. Lovecraft, and Stephen King. As of 2004, there were seventeen novels in his hugely popular ongoing Vampire Hunter D series. Many live action and anime movies of the 1980s and 1990s have been based on Kikuchi's novels.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Yoshitaka Amano was born in Shizuoka, Japan. He is well known as a manga and anime artist and is the famed designer for the Final Fantasy game series. Amano took part in designing characters for many of Tatsunoko Productions' greatest cartoons, including *Gatchaman* (released in the U.S. as *G-Force* and *Battle of the Planets*). Amano became a freelancer at the age of thirty and has collaborated with numerous writers, creating nearly twenty illustrated books that have sold millions of copies. Since the late 1990s Amano has worked with several American comics publishers, including DC Comics on the illustrated Sandman novel *Sandman: The Dream Hunters* with Neil Gaiman and *Elektra* and *Wolverine: The Redeemer* with best-selling author Greg Rucka.